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SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS
1599-1621

SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS

The Story of the Saint of Innocence

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PREFACE

This little book is an attempt at a study and interpretation of a lovable young saint, whose tercentenary this year will, it is to be hoped, increase special devotion to him. Saint John Berchmans is recommended as a patron and helper in solving the difficult problem of maintaining agreeable and efficient relations with the practical life of the hour without cooling in faith and reverence, of making the love of God the dominant motive of conduct without sacrificing any of the courtesies or failing in human sympathies.

I have depended for most of the facts in my sketch upon the excellent and exhaustive biography of the Saint by the Rev. Francis Goldie, S.J. The English Jesuit drew a large part of his material from official processes and enquiries, and from the contemporary Life by Father Cepari, S.J., the Saint's superior and confessor. As far as facts go, I can, to use a quaint phrase, be tracked in their snow. In the interpretation of facts I have sometimes allowed myself latitude.

THE AUTHOR.

St. Louis University
August 13, 1921

SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS

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CHAPTER I

HIS BIRTH

IN the following brief sketch of the life of Saint John Berchmans there will not be room for an elaborate description of the rich historical setting which Europe, and especially the Brabant and the Rome of that time afforded. To tell the truth, there is not much call for it. The interest of John's life lay in its contact with the big affairs of another world than this. The Saint touched human life, not at its points of earthly splendor and importance, but at its less obtrusive and less impressive surfaces of homely and domestic rounds of routine. The single hour of glorious life that is worth an age without a name, never came to John. Like most of us he was forced by circumstances into a pack-horse gait. His days, like ours, were much of a kind, singularly beggarly in their opportunities for spec-

tacular heroism. And yet he achieved heroism. With the scanty materials supplied by the stern realism of an ordinary every-day life, he succeeded in kindling a splendor which has burnt its way brightly through the mists of time, and, after three centuries, remains a fixed and steady glow in the night that has fallen upon the deeds of by-gone generations.

Still, we may not altogether disregard the historical setting of the Saint's life, if we wish to translate it with some degree of accuracy into terms of our more modern life. When we learn that John was the son of a shoemaker, for instance, we are likely to form a mistaken notion of the conditions in which he wrought his sanctity.

John was born March 13, 1599. Shakespeare was living across the Strait of Dover, and the intriguing Queen Elizabeth was still widening the breach between England and Rome in the pursuit of selfish political ends. The town of Diest where John was born was one of those energetic Flemish cities which furnish so many stirring episodes in the exciting pages of Froissart. The sturdy burghers were always stubborn defenders of their rights against the encroachments of kings and nobles.

In the modern sense of the word they could hardly be called democratic. Like Oliver Cromwell and Hampden, they fought for an extension of liberty beyond the narrow confines of court and castle; but, with the wresting of their own rights from the tyranny of monarchs, they lost all enthusiasm for any further enlargement of liberty and enlightenment which would include the working classes below them.

Charles John Berchmans, the father of John, belonged to a family of burghers prominent in the affairs of Diest. He himself was a magistrate; his father and some of his brothers had been mayors of the city. His wife, the Saint's mother, came of a family of burghers also, who on account of their wealth and connections seem to have considered themselves the social superiors of the Berchmanses. Charles John Berchmans must have received an unusually good education, which he kept up afterwards in the intervals of shoemaking; for, on the death of his wife in 1616, he prepared himself for the priesthood and was ordained in less than two years. In modern terminology we should call him a shoe-manufacturer.

The Saint, given his father's second name, and his three brothers and sister, were all sent away from home for their education even while they pursued their youthful studies in their native town. Their parents were afraid their young minds might be soiled by the coarse and often loose conversation of the artisans and apprentices who plied their trade under John's father in the family mansion, at the sign of "The Great and the Little Moon."

The houses in those days were not numbered, as the reader of the famous third chapter of Macaulay's History of England is aware. There we learn that in London nearly a century after the birth of Saint John the houses were not numbered. "There would have been little advantage in numbering them," says the historian; "for of the coachmen, chair-men, porters, and errand boys of London, a very small proportion could read. It was necessary to use marks which the most ignorant could understand. The shops were, therefore, distinguished by painted and sculptured signs, which gave a gay and grotesque aspect to the streets. The walk from Charing Cross to Whitechapel lay through an endless succession of Saracens' Heads, Royal Oaks, Blue Bears,

and Golden Lambs, which disappeared when they were no longer required for the direction of the common people."

It is clear that the world of John's youth was considerably different from what it is today. Making due allowance for such external differences we shall be able to reduce the unfamiliar conditions in which the Saint lived to something like their modern equivalents. One thing has not changed since then, and that is human nature. Its difficulties are substantially the same in every age amid the constant shifting of externals.

CHAPTER II

CHILDHOOD

WHEN John Berchmans died he was just entering upon manhood. His schoolmasters and many of his relations and boyhood friends were still living. Their sworn testimony before ecclesiastical tribunals investigating the life of the Saint has left a record of significant details from which it is possible to obtain a fairly life-like picture of his boyhood.

It is, we must own, the picture of a very extraordinary child. He attended a day-school until he was eleven. If there was no one to let him in when he returned home in the afternoon, he would go to a neighboring church and say several rosaries by way of passing the time until someone had leisure to notice his ringing of the doorbell. His grand-

mother tried to keep her seven-year-old grandson from rising before the dawn, and was told with precocious gravity that he must serve his two or three Masses before school-time. "What better place," added the remarkable little boy, "what better place could there be to win knowledge quickly and surely?"

Children are always contracting some strange and hideous complaint to the consternation of their parents. John developed a painful eruption which spread all over his face and made him for a while an object of general compassion. The fact that people remembered years afterwards that he never let out a whimper or cried during this distressing period, shows what a strong impression of patience and grit the boy made upon his friends.

He could not, of course, pass through childhood without being a victim of the inevitable bully. Not being able to defend himself, there was only one recourse, namely, to claim the protection of his natural defenders. This he refused to do, setting his jaws to endure without complaint, jests and abuse which the witnesses describe as shameful.

All through his life the testimony is unani-

mous as to his natural sweetness of temper. He was seldom seen on the street with other children. His mother, who became a confirmed invalid when he was nine, found him a cheering and helpful attendant in her sick-room, and an efficient substitute in the care of the four younger children.

At the age of eleven his father put him in a small boarding-school in Diest, conducted by a burgher named Stiphout. Although John remained in this school only for a year, his piety and proficiency in his studies made a profound impression upon his schoolmaster, who did the boy that terrible injustice, sometimes inflicted upon the helpless young by indiscreet elders, of praising him before all the scholars and proposing him as a model for imitation. It may be startling to learn that at the tender age of eleven John distinguished himself above the rest of the school in Latin versification. Even when we recall that Latin was the common tongue of educated Europeans at the time, and was taught from earliest school-days as the vernacular is taught to-day, anyone who is acquainted with the intricacies and pitfalls of classic verse will be willing to

concede to the little lad great credit for intelligence and industry.

After his year with Mr. Stiphout, John, ably seconded by his schoolmaster, prevailed upon his father to consent to forward his eager ambition to become a priest. With this end in view, John was transferred to another school, organized and carried on through the personal initiative and efforts of Father Peter Emmerick, a Premonstratensian monk in charge of the Church of our Lady in the same town of Diest. This holy priest had turned the roomy rectory into a private boarding-school where he received and trained in priestly studies and duties a small number of select and promising youngsters.

John's record of almost preternatural goodness becomes voluminous during the three or four years spent under the careful tutelage of Father Emmerick. John, in the natural and inevitable course of things, was again placed in the very difficult position of being the master's favorite pupil. The strange part of the situation is that John, without any particular effort, seemed at the same time to be popular with his fellow-students. He served Mass every morning, and it was noted that he en-

joyed this common privilege of boys with uncommon care and devotion. It is a rather sharp criticism of the way boys often serve Mass that people remembered how exactly John used to pronounce the responses.

In accordance with a quaint and pretty custom of the Middle Ages, a small boy took the part of the priest in miniature vestments in the chanting of the office in the parish-church on the Feast of the Holy Innocents. When John was chosen, townspeople cherished for many years the memory of the transparent innocence and holiness of the earnest child on this delightful occasion. A stanza from the hymn sung that day in Lauds must have taken on new significance in the minds of all present:

"Vos prima Christi victima,
Grex immolatorum tener,
Aram sub ipsam simplices
Palma et coronis luditis."

It is addressed to the slain infants of Bethlehem, who were the first martyrs of Christ. "You," it runs in English, "the first to die for Christ, tender lambs of sacrifice, you play in young unconcern with your palm and crowns

in the very shadow of the altar." A most appropriate song, indeed, at this beautiful medieval pageant in which the principal figure, a lad of twelve, played the rôle of holiness and renunciation, with all the greater zest and absence of self-consciousness because it was to him a reality of spiritual aspiration.

It is unlikely that this little boy fully realized the life of martyrdom which a deliberately chosen course of perfection demands. Many a boy and girl with noble instincts are attracted by the pure and clean splendor of the saintly ideal, the roses and lilies of the altar of sacrifice, and they play artlessly and prettily with the fateful flowers until budding passions and desires make them aware of the true meaning of the altar and the flowers. When they discover that the fragrant coronals are to be had and held only by stern and mighty refusals they draw back from the altar and the flowers. Well, John in his young innocence may have played with the flowers without comprehending their solemn significance. But, as we shall see, he had the discernment to discover new and more wonderful beauty in them as their real meaning dawned and

grew upon him; and he had the courage and the hardihood not to be daunted and driven from the company of the Innocents about the altar by the fear of sacrifices.

CHAPTER III

BOYHOOD

I AM afraid the list of John's excellences while he was at Father Emmerick's little seminary will not prove attractive to the reader unless he stops to discover the principle underlying them. The most extraordinary peculiarity noted by the stout and hearty Flemish observers in this growing boy was his air of detachment during meals. He was a healthy lad. Even in his young manhood, when hard study and austere practices tried his strength, and the plumpness of boyhood is often outgrown, he is described as "of fair height, of a ruddy complexion, and excellent constitution, by no means thin." His departure from the normal boy's lively interest in food was probably either a deliberate measure of conduct, or the result of spiritual and intellectual preoccupation unusual in one so young. He ate sparely and perfunctorily, never criticised or

complained about what was placed before him, so that his companions used to jest about him being off on his travels while he sat at table. It was the custom at Father Emmerick's to have some pious book read at meals, a task which very congenially fell oftenest to the lot of John.

He liked to be in the church and to listen to sermons. He was never talkative and had to be driven from study by his master in order to share in the games of the other boys. Although Father Emmerick declares that he never heard John indulge in an honest fit of laughter, he takes care to add the strange and apparently irreconcilable testimony that John bore the reputation of being a good-natured and merry youth whom the boys received as a welcome addition in their games. He positively refused to quarrel with anyone; when a row started he went off and played by himself, if he could not compose the difference. He seldom provoked the hot temper always on the spring in an absorbing game; when he did, it was always beyond his intention, and he received the broadside as if it were directed against someone a thousand miles away. Often at the very pitch of excitement he would take

advantage of the general distraction and withdraw unnoticed to a quiet corner where he was sometimes surprised in prayer.

Another detail will be of interest to American readers, who accept heat-radiators and abundance of coal as natural blessings nearly as common and as necessary as the air we breathe. Even to-day in the continental countries of Europe, where coal and other fuels have to be imported, heating outfits are comparatively scarce. Few houses or large buildings are adequately provided against the cold, so that, in winter, necessity, which knows no law of propriety, forces the inmates to wear warm caps even in the house. Three hundred years ago the hardships of a European winter must have been far greater than they are to-day, when chilblains and frostbite are ordinary domestic phenomena in such southern countries as Spain. We shall not be puzzled, therefore, to read that John's reverence for the priesthood was so profound that he had to be ordered peremptorily to keep his cap on his head whenever Father Emmerick was teaching the class. To this list of remembered and recorded facts about John while he was at Father Emmerick's let us add one more,

namely, that he was always looking for opportunities to make himself useful, often coming to the relief of the servants by volunteering to do their work.

Out of these scattered details what sort of living boy can be reconstructed? Here is a lad who, from twelve to fifteen, is described as being serious, thoughtful, studious, pious, austere and reticent beyond his years. So far it is a rather formidable picture, and we should be afraid of him were it not that the record insists so emphatically on the further fact that he was good-natured and popular with his companions. Boys know one another better than their elders know them. We have to ask ourselves why it was those boys liked him and forgave him for being pious and for being the teacher's favorite.

The two virtues that boys can spot with unfailing intuition, and idolize abjectly, are sincerity and pluck. It makes little difference to them towards what ends these virtues are exercised, whether a boy stays up night after night to be first in his class, or subjects himself to an heroic regimen out of a stern ambition to be a great ball-player. They may have their own ideas about the particular ambition

in the abstract; they may feel that it is foolish or hopeless or quixotic, and it may be all very funny and absurd to outsiders. But, if, after applying their rough boyish tests to an ambition of this kind, they discover that it is genuine and not to be discouraged by jest or torment or privation, they lift the young idealist up on a pedestal and when they go home boast about him at the family table.

We can be sure that the boys in John's school took an accurate measure of his piety. Among boys there is a natural suspicion of anything extraordinary in the way of docility to teachers and habits of religious devotion. I do not think this is due so much to a perverse nature as to the frequency of fraud or illusion in this particular field of boy life. Boys would like to know whether docility and religion are owing to timidity, or fear of punishment, or a desire to stand in with the authorities, or the hope of easy promotion, or an effeminate shrinking from the rough-and-tumble of life, before they give these qualities a clean bill and register them as admirable and commendable. All the accounts are unanimous in stating explicitly and with precision of detail that John was liked wherever he lived. When he was

dying in a strange city his room was so crowded with friends that orders had to be issued to keep them out. They begged for the arduous privilege of staying up all the summer night in the hot and stifling atmosphere of the sick-room; and when he died tears were shed openly in the lecture-halls and on the streets of Rome for the young foreigner who had been living there less than three years.

All this is to be kept in mind if we are to see something like a living image of the Saint instead of an impossible scarecrow that never existed. John's principles and conduct were inflexible and severe. His manner sometimes seems to us across the centuries hard and uninviting. And yet he passed the terrifying scrutiny of his young contemporaries, who voted him sweet-tempered and amiable, and conferred their highest and rarest gift of popularity upon him. This is the big fact that stands out like a rock in the smooth current of John's outward life. It cannot be ignored; and every other fact has to be made to harmonize with that if John is to be other than a mere simulacrum and figment of the imagination.

CHAPTER IV

EARLY PIETY

IT is clear that John was what is known as a model boy. And we know that other boys are unpleasantly shy of a model boy, not always because they are unappreciative of rectitude but because, with a keen intuition based upon more intimate experience, they do not indorse the verdict of older persons. They are not, as a rule, sufficiently articulate to give their reasons for disliking a "model boy." In general they feel that he is not genuine, without being able to say precisely why they feel that way about it. The feeling puts them, in the eyes of their elders, into the false position of seeming to dislike goodness. The so-called model boy shows them up as young reprobates simply because they withhold their approval of him. The consequent sense of injustice is irritating beyond measure, and their irritation vents itself

not only in reprisals upon the "model boy," but also, unfortunately, in a kind of discouraged defiance of all public standards of conduct.

Of course, I am supposing the boys to be a rather decent sort. At Father Emmerick's, and for the rest of his short life, it was John's good fortune to be thrown only with youths who were spiritual enough to harbor ambitions for the priesthood. They could see that John was strict, not because he wanted to be better than they were or for any other reason except that he loved Jesus Christ, his Creator and Redeemer. In some way they could not fathom he had succeeded in realizing with an intense personal consciousness the infinite and tremendous love which Christ felt for him. They knew that Christ felt the same love for them, but they had not, as John had, the courage to face squarely and the grace to realize this sublime truth while accepting at the same time the heroic sacrifices which such a realization involves. Their response to the love of Christ lacked the ardors of John's love. But in their souls they knew John was right. They may have envied him his clear vision and resolute fortitude and the mighty

strength of his love; but they never dreamed of envying him for the good opinion which his elders had formed of him. They were aware that John did not give a snap of his fingers for human opinion as such. For John there was nothing of importance in all creation outside of the wonderful mystery of Christ's love for him. John might have been harsh and remote and less human in his relations with them, and they would have forgiven him and respected him, because the impulses of a love responding to the love of Christ are the noblest and most generous that the human heart can experience. It is an adorable privilege to be near it and to watch it, even though it sometimes scorch the onlooker with a sense of his own ineptitude.

As a matter of fact, John's natural sweetness of temper grew as he advanced in the supernatural life. He knew how to invest sanctity with human charm. His severities and ardors neither got on his own nerves nor on the nerves of others.

It was while he was at Father Emmerick's that he made his first Holy Communion. We hardly need this good priest's testimony to help us to imagine what a great event this was in

the life of John. Father Emmerick declared that he wept when he was hearing the general confession of the twelve-year-old boy, and describes John on that occasion as an angel "all bathed in tears, as with the deepest contrition he accused himself of faults which were but the lightest." Indeed, the confessor tells us that he hesitated for some time in doubt as to whether he had sufficient matter for absolution. It is easy to believe him when he attests to a superhuman look on the face of the boy at the sacred moment when the sacramental Christ visited him for the first time.

It was not long after this great day that John wrote a Latin poem, which is still preserved in the archives of the royal library of Brussels. The boys were told to hand in some Latin verses and to choose their subjects for themselves. John chose the Name of Jesus and wrote some forty verses, a part of which the following lines reproduce in English. They are chiefly interesting as the effort of a saint's love of Christ to struggle into expression through the unfamiliarity of a boy with a strange language, through the difficulties of an intricate art, and the artificial devices of a decadent poetic tradition.

"Not though Calliope gave me a thousand tongues; not though she gave them to drink at the fountain of Philetas; though the leader of the Castalian chorus should dictate my song, should I be able to tell the sweetness of His Name.

"Honeyed Name of names, laden with the sweetness of spring, sweet to the heavens, to the earth, to the salt sea! Full of good promise to men—sweeter than any nectar that Hybla nurtures in its reedy cells, breathing perfumes of lilies and violets, of deep red flowers, of roses from Elysian fields; above all the glories of the field, more glorious than their scarlet or ethereal hues!

"Hail to Thee, Son of God, old beyond all ages! Hail, All-Excelling! Never was word more grateful to our ears; never was name thought of like to Thine. Happiness of man, every way blessed—the one hope of salvation for all mankind!"

Anyone who feels a personal love of Christ will inevitably be drawn to her who by nature and grace enjoyed the privilege of knowing Christ's love and returning it beyond all mortal and immortal creatures. John's love of

Christ may be said to have thrown him into the company of our Blessed Lady.

During the three years at Father Emmerick's his devotion to Mary was so conspicuous as to become a matter of general knowledge, to be accepted as a matter of course in the life of a boy so intent upon the dear mystery of Christ's love for him. The mention of her name could always fill his eyes with eager and glad light. Every time he passed a statue of her in the corridors of a house, or on the streets of the little Catholic city, he murmured a prayer to her. It was his fixed rule never to leave a church without having knelt at her altar. He began the practice of abstaining from a part of his meals in order to prove, as it were, that he, too, understood with her the delight to be found at the very heart of pain and privation when they are undergone for the Beloved. One of his companions at this time treasured in after years a translation of the *"Salve Regina"* in Latin hexameters which John made with much boyish labor.

About three miles from Diest there has been for centuries a famous sanctuary of pilgrimage known as the shrine of our Lady of Montaigu. The celebrated Jus-

tus Lipsius, whose manliness of character is not nearly so obvious as his genius in classical scholarship, wrote a book about the Shrine of our Lady of Montaigu, and another about the equally famous Belgian shrine, that of our Lady of Hals. John throughout his life had special devotion to our Lady under both these titles. The proximity of Montaigu to the town of his boyhood was to him a providential arrangement of a peculiarly happy sort. It was one of the greatest pleasures of his early years to walk there on pilgrimage, observing silence the whole way and occupied with the saying of innumerable rosaries.

One who spent so much time in the company of Christ's mother could not help being exceptionally pure of mind and heart and body. Everyone noted his sensitiveness to anything, no matter how remote or indirect, which might tend to lower his ideal of purity. There was no outer defense of modesty which he felt he could neglect in the safeguarding of his purity. He would not allow anyone to touch him: and whoever took liberties of speech or showed a careless mind and imagination he studiously avoided.

This delicate purity of John's is one of the

striking features in his life. There are two remarkable circumstances to be noted in connection with it, if we are to understand it, partially at least, and to admire it. In the first place we can hardly suppose it to be the innocence of ignorance. A brutal directness of speech about the facts of life, arising perhaps from a certain coarse honesty more than from any licentiousness, and very prevalent in the early sixteenth century, would hardly make it possible for a bright boy to remain in ignorance of the fundamental physical facts of human life. Moreover, the bluff and outspoken manners of Brabant saw little sense in discovering pretty synonyms for a spade. We have to keep this fact in mind in order not to be astonished when we hear that Daniel exposing the two wicked elders was the subject of a play given by the boys at Father Emmerick's, in which John played the part of Daniel with a scorching disgust and indignation most suitable to the part and entirely unfeigned.

The second remarkable circumstance to be noted about John's purity is that it was not tempted. After his death his confessors bore testimony to his freedom, seemingly miraculous, from all sensual temptation. "I am not

aware," he once said towards the end of his life, "of ever having had thoughts against purity or chastity; and, indeed, I have the greatest loathing for anything opposed to that virtue." He ascribed this happy condition "to the grace of God and the favor of the Blessed Virgin." His extraordinary care and precautions in the preservation of modesty were not due to any preoccupation of the mind with animal sensations. His sensitiveness, therefore, cannot be truthfully described as morbid. Nor can he be justly called a prude or a prig. Prudes and prigs think only about themselves. John thought little about himself, but much about the Beauty of Christ. When he refused to allow anyone to touch him, he was not thinking of human customs and appearances, still less of possible sins. The beauty of purity, as set forth in the benign figures of Christ and our Lady, had captured his young soul, and created an instinct and a passion for a noble species of spiritual excellence. In the pursuit of this excellence he, as it were, developed antennæ which helped him to detect the presence of, and to shun, the faintest approaches against his beloved virtue. The fine dignity

with which this high ardor invests the boy even in human eyes shows how much we all were made to maintain the supremacy of reason over passion.

CHAPTER V

VOCATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

PERHAPS the worst blow John ever received came to him in his fourteenth year. For the one and only time in his whole career we see him seriously disturbed. The younger children in the Berchmans' household were growing up and had to be sent from home like John for their education. This additional expense, combined with a falling off in his custom and the prolonged sickness of his wife, obliged John's father to make retrenchments and to study out some new source of revenue. When John was summoned home from Father Emmerick's to be told sadly by his father that his services were needed to sustain the family fortunes, and that his school-days were over, the news stunned him. All his habitual reserve and calm self-possession seemed to desert him. He flung himself at his father's feet in a paroxysm of tears. The out-

burst is a revelation of ardent temperament for which those who do not understand the intensity of a saint's feeling, are not wholly prepared. When John recovered his speech he told his father that he was convinced God wished him to be a priest. If that ambition were altogether impossible, he was ready to accept the impossibility as a sign that he was wrong in his conviction; but, if it were merely a matter of difficulties, he was ready and eager to work his way through school and save all further expense. The interview took place in the presence of his invalid mother, who sided with John.

The unusual display of violent feeling and strong purpose in the gentle and silent boy startled and impressed his father. The honest Flemish burgher was not prepared to strangle his son's vocation to the priesthood. But it was not to be cultivated at his expense. The good man had cast up his accounts and found it could not be done. If John could manage to pursue his vocation without being a drain on the family exchequer, well and good. Two maiden aunts, belonging to a class who are the fairy godmothers of young nephews, came to the rescue. Through their kindly offices their

parish priest, Dean Timmermans, was induced to take the boy into his rectory and to prepare him for the priesthood free of charge. We have an exalted idea of the parish priests of John's native town and, indeed, of all the secular clergy, who for centuries in every European country kept the ranks of the priesthood supplied with excellent recruits by voluntarily performing the functions of seminaries when those institutions were comparatively scarce.

But the family pride could not brook the presence of John in Diest in the rôle of a dependent. After a few weeks, long enough to endear himself to the Dean, John was placed, through the efforts of his father, in a situation in the house of a prominent priest in the primatial city of Mechlin. It must be recorded as a contribution to the abundant testimony borne everywhere to the boy's remarkable popularity that his father and family incurred the displeasure of their townsfolk for sending him away. Mr. Stiphout, his early master, was particularly resentful. Many years afterwards, when he was called as a witness in the cause of John's beatification, he made the pathetic admission: "Life has been very bitter to me since I lost that holy child."

The intentions of Providence to give John every facility for advancing in holiness can almost be read in the uniform excellence of his schoolmasters. Canon Froymont, grand precentor of the cathedral chapter, in whose house young Berchmans was now installed in the double capacity of servant and student, was a large-minded and earnest priest who could discern, and accord encouraging appreciation to, the genius of a saint. His title meant that he had charge of the choir of canons: he was, therefore, a man of considerable local importance. He employed the leisure, which his office allowed him, in conducting a school for the sons of people of good family. In limited numbers he received them into his home and trained them in manners and morals as well as in letters. It was an establishment much like Father Emmerick's, only more select socially. The fact has to be noted, since it bears directly on John. He belonged to the gentle class himself, and now he had to appear among his equals as an inferior and servant in a place where his family was not known. It was all well enough to do the work of the servants at Father Emmerick's; it was kindness and goodness of heart; but it involved no real humilia-

tion, and was regarded generally as the juvenile expression of unconscious and graceful condescension. But here he had to attend on the wants and needs of the other pupils in order to earn his board and keep and education.

John's genuineness in the pursuit of eternal interests was insensible to the petty annoyances which worldly self-respect experiences. Canon Froymont was obliged to exert his authority to prevent John from performing menial tasks which were thought unbecoming to a student in his establishment. We are left to infer that the lad entered with a certain cheerful zest into his duties. "No dinner," we are told, "however little out of the common run, came off at any of the canons' but Berchmans was asked for, to wait at table." The testimony is not without value and helps us to correct a constant tendency to imagine John as an abstracted and solemn-visaged youth out of touch with homely realities. No such youth could by any stretching of probabilities be conceived as making an efficient and pleasing server at a festive board. Thus, John's popularity followed him to Mechlin. The fact teases us for explanation; and the explanation

is not easy. The boy cared nothing for popularity, or for anything else except the love of Christ and the will of God. The direct evidence of this singleness of devotion to supernatural aims is in the very nature of things often stern and forbidding to eyes that watch him from a distance. We must supply the little concrete details of an attractive smile, an unaffected candor and sincerity, pleasing qualities of manner, an air of lofty ardor and high resolve, which made him lovable to his associates and friends in his most austere manifestations.

Canon Froymont soon relieved Berchmans of his menial employments and instead put him in charge of some of the very young pupils. It is hard to see how John found time for his studies when one reads his daily routine with these little lads. He awoke them in the morning, helped them to dress, had them repeat simple prayers which he had taught them, took them to Mass, instructed them in the catechism, grounded them in their elements, gave them the air on afternoon walks, and finally put them to bed after their night-prayers. Though it was a labor of love, one

cannot help noting that John was certainly earning his way.

The appreciative canon took to the practice of showing off John to his friends. The boy stood it with his accustomed tact and common sense. The wealthy acquaintances, whom Berchmans met while accompanying the canon, recognized like everyone else the youth's natural charm and were disposed to enter into further friendly relations with him. This, of course, would delight the canon. But John, without offending anyone, least of all the canon, contrived to maintain that reserve which his position and holy philosophy of life required.

He kept his clothes mended and clean; but he thought old clothes were good enough for one in his situation, and the canon had to be peremptory before John could be induced to buy a new suit.

On Fridays the canons, each accompanied by his servant, attended chapter-meetings. Canon Froymont always took John along. While the canons were inside, the young servants were wont to hold a less serious conclave of their own in the vestibule. This latter John never attended, preferring to spend the time

before our Lady's altar in a near-by church. He found frequent opportunities—how, it is not easy to see—of stealing into some church to commune quietly with his divine Master. Nearly his whole Sunday was spent in church. Kneeling upright, he would hear three Masses, and never missed vespers or a sermon.

We rather like the canon, and it is very certain John liked him. The grand precentor had a dog which he was training to retrieve in the marshes. The puppy had the usual prejudice of all young land animals against cold water, and John observed with lively interest how the pup's reluctance was overcome by small bribes of sugared bread. "Watch that dog," was his reflection expressed to a fellow-boarder, "conquering his natural inclinations just for a piece of bread. God ought to succeed in making us take some cold plunges for a reward of everlasting happiness."

Another incident of this period helps to fill out our conception of John's character. One Sunday in the spring-time the canon and young Berchmans went on a pilgrimage to Montaigu, the canon on horseback, the favorite pupil in his rôle of domestic trudging along on foot. The roads were not familiar to either of them,

and on their return in the evening two guides, whom the canon had imprudently paid in advance, deserted them one after the other in the middle of a violent storm. The two pilgrims became lost in some thick woods, with darkness coming on and lightning-bolts shivering the trees all about them. The canon was unnerved. He dismounted from his horse and asked John to take his place in the saddle and lead the way. The boy leaped upon the horse and with cool composure forged ahead until they emerged from the forest on the edge of the town they were seeking. The canon tried to invest the episode afterwards with an air of the awful and the supernatural; but we have a shrewd suspicion that he was badly scared and was over-impressed by the coolness and courage of young Berchmans.

Valor seems to be a common characteristic of all the saints. One doubts whether there was ever a saint yet who was dismayed by the terrors of the night or by the menacing accidents of land and sea.

CHAPTER VI

A CHANGE OF SCHOOL

JOHN was to take a plunge which his family failed to regard with complaisance. The events leading up to it can be narrated briefly. The establishment of Canon Froymont differed from that of Father Emmerick in one respect: the older students followed the classes in the archiepiscopal seminary near by, returning to the canon's house in the evening to prepare their lessons under his tutorship. John attended these classes until the autumn of 1615, when he entered the newly opened college of the Jesuits in Mechlin. John thus brought odium upon himself and the new college among his former teachers; but he knew his own mind and could be very independent and careless of consequences on occasion. We are unacquainted with the grounds of his preference. One of his biographers tells us that the permission

to change was wrung from the canon by John's entreaties; but, as the general attitude of the canon towards the Jesuits is known to have been friendly, it can hardly be supposed that John found much difficulty in having himself transferred to the new school.

The Jesuits were not so familiarly known in the Belgium of that day as they were to become later on. Their Order had been founded within living memory. The learning and sanctity of some of the members of the Order, and their organized and highly efficient methods in opposing heresy, spreading the faith in distant lands, and raising the standards of virtue and intelligence in European centers, were no doubt borne to the ears of Berchmans on the wings of rumor and captured his young imagination. The fame of that brilliant Netherlander, d'Hondt, known now as Blessed Peter Canisius, had very likely penetrated every corner of Brabant. John must have set foot in their school on the opening day with something like eager curiosity. It is interesting to learn that his first impressions do not seem to have been particularly enthusiastic in their favor. At least he confessed afterwards to a fellow-student of that time that he

felt no attraction towards their manner of life.

John was assigned to "Rhetoric," the highest class in classical studies, and won the highest honors at the end of the year. We learn some details about his ardor in his studies which make us regret that he was only a day-scholar at the college. Canon Froymont apparently shared the general belief, not without some foundation in fact, that boys could not study too much. At any rate there was no rule in his establishment curtailing the hours of voluntary application to one's books. And so we find the growing boy Berchmans seating himself on the edge of his bed, carefully shielding his light from the eyes of the other boys in his dormitory, and sometimes spending the whole night in poring over his text-books. It was an appalling indiscretion. We are not surprised, therefore, to hear now a faint hint of a delicateness of constitution.

Several original Latin plays were given that year, constructed, as the custom was, out of the lives of saints. In these plays, very appropriately, John was selected to take the part of the hero of chastity. He had been given the rôle of St. Henry of Germany in one play, we learn, and had already memorized more

than four hundred lines, when it was decided to relieve him of his part. The play was to be given in the open air before a large audience and it was feared that the exertion of endeavoring to be heard would impose a dangerous strain upon his voice and weak chest. When the decision was announced to John he said nothing; but a sudden flush betrayed his disappointment. From what we know of John and his contempt of the little vanities, it is easy to accept the explanation of a witness that there was included in John's part the Emperor Henry's solemn vow of virginity, which he had set his heart upon delivering with realistic sincerity before the assembled world of Mechlin to the honor of his favorite virtue of purity.

It is much easier to study hard in order to win prizes or gain distinction or please parents and teachers than to study out of a sense of duty and to do the will of God. Yet it is impossible to discover that John Berchmans was ever urged along in his intense application to his books by any other motive than a desire to please God and to fit himself for His service. This activity of holy motive cannot be kept alive except by a supernatural life

of a very earnest kind. If Christ and eternity and spiritual realities are to replace the realities of time as incitements to labor and perseverance, they must occupy a foremost place in our habitual consciousness. And this will never happen unless we train ourselves to keep them in mind by frequent prayers.

We should know from John's outward life that he cultivated extraordinary habits of prayer even though there were no records of the fact. We are not surprised to learn that he sometimes prayed at his bedside long into the night, and that he eagerly availed himself of the opportunity of entering the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, that famous training-school of holiness, still flourishing, which a young countryman of John's had started in Rome in the preceding generation. John made himself conspicuous by his efforts to induce others to join the Sodality. He recited the Office of the Blessed Virgin every day lying prostrate on the ground in lowly fealty to her. Every Saturday and on the vigils of great feasts he fasted in honor of her, and out of a desire to do penance hunted up some disagreeable work to do in the canon's establishment, such as scouring the greasy pots and pans

in the scullery. He went to Holy Communion two or three times a week—this, at the time, was considered frequent—and spent several hours in thanksgiving. On Fridays he made the Stations of the Cross out of doors, along a rough highway, in his bare feet. To do this without attracting attention he chose the hour of evening twilight, and put on an old pair of shoes and stockings from which he had carefully cut out the soles.

This wonderful piety is not in itself a conclusive proof of real sanctity. Sometimes it makes people proud and fastidious and conceited and hard to get along with. John was in all probability holier and more perfect than his teachers; but, if the thought of criticizing them or condemning them ever occurred to him, it is certain he never encouraged it or acted on it. He put himself entirely into their hands in a spirit of reverence. When he had left the college in the afternoon he was no longer under their obedience; but, if they expressed their wishes on certain points of conduct beyond the precincts of the college, those wishes were always respected by him. Thus, the college faculty were known to disapprove of public bathing, perhaps because it was too

promiscuous or because the blunt customs of the times made the practice harmful to modesty. It is not unlikely that John was in entire sympathy with the attitude of his teachers; at any rate this was a form of amusement which his companions could never induce him to indulge in.

Nor can we discover that John's relations with the other boys were made unpleasant by his high class-standing, his habits of piety, and his scrupulous devotion to the rules of the college and the wishes of his teachers. These are certainly dreadful handicaps to popularity. But here as elsewhere the evidence obliges us to believe that John was generally liked. Either he possessed wonderful tact, or his young, whole-souled earnestness in the pursuit of a high excellence was so vivid as to arrest their thoughtlessness and levy tribute of genuine respect and admiration. Of course, there was one exception. There generally is. After John's death one of the witnesses appearing before the commission gathering information about the Saint's life, averred that he used to torment John secretly while they were both going to the Jesuit college. He could not say why he did it except

for jealousy or sheer perversity. Anyhow he declared that he did his best to make life miserable for John Berchmans, who could have stopped the whole affair any time by a word to the teachers or to the boys. The young tyrant, now grown into a man, was moved by the memory of the boy's silent heroism to disclose a concealed chapter in John's life.

John spent one year in the Jesuit college. His record during that time prepares us for the determination slowly arrived at of entering the religious life. It is a high testimony to the character of his instructors that the form of religious life which he chose was theirs.

CHAPTER VII

JOHN RESOLVES TO BECOME A JESUIT

IT was not an easy matter for John to make up his mind to be a Jesuit. His parents would oppose him. They were waiting impatiently for his ordination when powerful family influence would be exerted to obtain for him a benefice lucrative enough to enable him to restore his father's diminished estate. It was a question of comfort and social ambition rather than of pressing need, but hardly less urgent from the practical outlook of his parents. Moreover he had reason to anticipate as a result of his contemplated step the displeasure of his father's friends among the clergy, who naturally had sympathized all along with his dreams of John's future in the Church. As a matter of fact the archbishop and other ecclesiastics, whom John's father had enlisted in his cause, strove to dissuade the boy from his purpose.

John arrived at his resolution slowly. Having convinced himself that it was the will of God he became adamant. He had saved up —we are not told how—twenty-five florins. These he divided into three portions: one portion he gave to the poor; the other two were spent for Masses at two shrines of our Lady, one of them being, of course, the beloved sanctuary at Montaigu. He began to hear two Masses every day and made a vow that he would carry out his resolution to enter the Society of Jesus. Then he wrote the following letter, which is still preserved in the Royal Library at Brussels, to his parents:

"My Honored Father and Dearest Mother,

"It is now nearly three or four months that our Lord has in a most marked way been knocking at my door, and that I, so to say, have kept it shut. But when I saw that whether I played, walked, or whatever I did, one thing was always present to my mind—the choice of a fixed state of life—I have come to the conclusion, yes, I am determined to serve our dear Lord, with His grace, in the religious life; and this after many a Communion, and many other good works. For, who is there

who, seeing all the miseries, dangers, and fearful sins in every state of life, is not filled with horror? And, again, when one sees those perfections, humility, etc., and lastly that burning love of God and our neighbor, how can one not betake himself to it?

"It is very true it is some way hard for parents and for relations to give up their children, but what would they do if our dear Lord —may He long spare them!—should call them to Himself? Again, when sometimes I am thinking in my heart that if I saw here before me on the one side father, mother, sister, etc., and on the other, God the Lord with His, and I trust, *my* Blessed Mother; and those on one side should say, 'My dear son, I beg you, by the trouble and labor I have endured for you, follow me,' and on the other side Christ Jesus should cry, 'I have for you been born, scourged, crowned with thorns, and at last died on a cross: see here My five holy wounds! And have I not endured these for you? And do you not know that up to this time I have nourished your soul with My Sacred Body, and slaked its thirst with My Sacred Blood? And will you now be so ungrateful?'—when I think of this, my dearest parents, my heart so

sets me on fire that, were it possible, I would this very hour fly into religion; and my heart, my soul, will not be at rest till they have found their best loved Master.

"But you will say, 'It is as yet too soon; wait till you have taken your degrees.' I ask you, if a poor man were to come to your door to ask for alms, and you were wanting to give it to him, would you not take him for a fool and a madman, were he to say, 'I will come for it in a year or two?' It is doubtful whether you would be willing to give it to him. Are we not all beggar men before the face of Almighty God? It pleases Him now, after much praying by me, to give in His goodness one of His best alms, that of a vocation to religion, and in particular to the Society of Jesus, the hammer of all heresies, the vessel of virtue and perfections; and shall I spurn the grace away with my foot and despise it? It is doubtful whether our Lord would allow it to last in me for two years; and then I might have to hear—and what a misfortune that would be!—'I know you not.'

"So now, from my whole heart, I offer myself to Jesus Christ, willing even to fight under His colors. I hope you will not be so un-

reasonable as to oppose yourself to Christ; but that, like the people of Egypt (who, as I have read in history, offered their children to their false god, the crocodile, to be devoured by it; and, while they were being devoured, made great rejoicings), so, I hope, you, too, will rejoice like them, and give God our Lord praise and thanks that your son should be found so worthy as, not to be *given* to God (for he does not belong to you), but to be *restored* to Him.

"I commend myself to your good prayers, that our dear Lord may give me perseverance to the end of my life, and may grant you with me hereafter eternal life.

"JOHN BERCHMANS."

This is not a bad letter for a boy of seventeen. It contains clear marks of a trained intelligence. It is particularly valuable in helping us to combine into a living unity those two strong contrasts in John's life, namely, his grim firmness of character and the amiable sweetness of disposition which created a friendly atmosphere wherever he lived. One can easily perceive that in this letter his heart aches for his parents. These are not the words

of a self-opinionated and selfish boy who is bent on having his own way regardless of consequences.

It is true, John is set in his resolution. He makes that clear enough. But he also indicates that it took him a long time to make up his mind, with much serious reflection, earnest praying, and extra efforts at righteous living. This was no sudden whim nor spasmodic impulse. He had reason to believe that it was not his own will but the will of God that he was following. At the same time, while the decision brought him unutterable happiness, he could not forget that his parents would most probably not be able to see the matter in the same light and would be sorrow-stricken where he was elated. The letter shows him entering into their minds with pathetic sympathy and painfully gathering together all his boyish stores of eloquence to bring them around to his view and save them needless suffering. He simply had to follow Christ; but, while he was forced to leave his parents, he longed to escape the hard trial of leaving them in tears.

CHAPTER VIII

PARENTAL OBJECTIONS

JOHN'S anticipation of a storm was not illusory. His letter fell like a bomb at the sign of "The Great and the Little Moon." His father came on post-haste from Diest and went into a long and animated session with his son. It ended as we might expect. Then the poor man directed his steps to the Jesuit college with sentiments of resentment which we can all easily understand and feel for. He called for Father de Greef, the boy's confessor, who has left an account of the visit.

"He urged," writes Father de Greef, "that he had educated John, at a cost far exceeding his means, to be the support of his numerous family, and accused me of putting the idea into the boy's head. This last statement I absolutely and positively denied, asserting, as was the fact, that his son was the

first, of his own accord and by God's guidance, to speak of his vocation and to consult me as to how he could put it into execution. I pleaded that I was bound to give him that assistance by introducing him to Father Provincial, a service which I myself would have wished for in similar circumstances.

"I told Mr. Berchmans that I, too, had met with just such opposition from my father, who like himself was a shoemaker; for I was not merely his eldest, but his only son; and, though he had exactly the same ideas about me as Charles Berchmans had about John, I had brought him around by strong reasons; that the temporal consolations parents look for from their children are little worth and uncertain, especially when, not understanding the greatness of the heavenly gift, and without reason or necessity, they endeavor to turn them from the path of perfection; I was sure that, as far as spiritual assistance went, John would be able to give much greater help to his parents and relations in religion than by remaining in the world and taking some living or rich benefice, though he should by so doing seem to bring some relief to his friends in a worldly point of view. I recollect urging

many similar things, and with a good deal of trouble, on John's father, who, though not without tears, at last seemed to give into my arguments."

Father de Greef's story is an old story. Good, honest, kindly race of fathers who, in every century since Christ began calling His apostles, have heard His invitation to their sons as a knell of doom! Their sacrifice has been, for a while at least, more scarifying than their sons'. Fond dreams have been dissipated, and golden hopes dashed—dreams and hopes of their youth which had woven themselves into the inmost fibers of their being, which their own experience had missed, but which were to be realized vicariously in their bright and promising lads. Who dares to scorn their fury and their tears? It is very human, indeed. Yet seldom are human love and affection so disinterested and so pure.

Father de Greef may have thought that his talk with Charles Berchmans had settled everything. But John's mother back in Diest, with something of an invalid's petulance, failed to succumb to the logic and good sense of the Jesuit, as it was retailed to her by her husband upon his return. On the contrary,

she succeeded in reviving his opposition. He ordered his son to consult the Capuchin Fathers in Mechlin, one of whom was a relative of Mrs. Berchmans. The Fathers were instructed beforehand to do all they could to shake John in his resolution.

Although the boy was aware of the situation, he complied with the command of his father, confident that he could place his case in a light which Capuchins could understand and approve. One interview was enough. At the end of it the Capuchin community urged him to carry out his purpose. There was only one dissenting voice. His mother's relative, under family pressure, doubtless, refused to see the matter from John's point of view, and every few days turned in at Canon Froymont's gate to have a talk with John and make a new effort to batter down the boy's determination. The proceeding must have become exceedingly tiresome to young Berchmans, for it led him to do a most extraordinary thing. His manner towards everyone was kindly and considerate; towards priests and religious his gentleness was tinged deeply with reverence. One is, therefore, startled to learn that John finally put an end to these visits one day by

taking his relation by the arm and gently leading him to the door with the following ultimatum: "If you are determined to discuss this subject further, there is the door; you may go back where you came from."

The Berchmans' family now made a move which commonly comes next after issues of this kind have been clearly defined, and agreement is seen to be impossible. "The boy's will is the wind's will," and there is always some hope that the strong currents of the world will be powerful enough in time to discourage the slow up-stream progress of the youthful idealist. The letter in which John refused to consider a postponement of his decision, is still preserved.

"Ever Honored Father and Dearest Mother,

"I am very happy to learn that you are in good health, and I hope and heartily pray our Lord God that He will always spare you all in the same. Still I am greatly surprised that you, in place of loving and thanking God for the great favor that He has willed to do not only myself but you also, in calling me to holy religion, and to such an Order, where men lead the lives of angels, that you, I say,

should counsel me not to listen to our dear Lord, and to put off my vocation for five or six months. It is not right, as you well know, that in order to obey you I should be disobedient to God. Our dear Lord, when He called a young man to follow Him, would not let him go to bury his father, who was just dead, though this was a good work, and one which needed but a short time. And when He called another, He forbade him to say good-bye to his friends, saying, 'No one putting his hand to the plough, and afterwards looking backwards, is fit for the kingdom of God.' Why do you think He did this, if it was not to show us that we must follow our vocation then and there, without delay?

"So then, my ever honored parents, that I may obey God our Lord, that I may make my salvation sure, and in fine that I may avoid that fearful sentence, 'I called and you refused. I also will laugh in your destruction,' I mean, with God's grace, in a fortnight hence to share the joy of my brothers in religion. And I trust, through God our Lord, through the prayers of my brethren, and through yours

also, and my own poor petitions, to obtain that He Who has given the good will may grant me perseverance to the end.

"JOHN BERCHMANS,
"Your Obedient Son."

CHAPTER IX

A FAREWELL LETTER

THE summer of 1616, when John was resisting these assaults upon his firmness, could hardly have been a pleasant time for him. His parents could not know the pain they were giving him, simply because they could not know the importunate urging of Christ's call in the soul of their son. Not knowing the clearness and loudness of those Divine accents they naturally supposed that John's resolve to enter the religious life was a youthful fancy opposed to his own and their best interests. They felt justified, therefore, in offering hindrances, and in appealing to his filial affections from a decision which seemed cruelly to ignore their rights and their natural hopes and expectations. John was not insensible to their plea. His heart bled for them. If they could only hear the unmistakable call of Christ ringing in his soul night and day,

they would yield with tears of gladness, for they were good Catholic parents. John did his best to convince them of the authenticity of the Divine summons to a higher life. Indeed, one cannot help wondering at his failure to convince them. His whole life from early childhood had marked him signally as one set apart by God for special service; and the letters, given in the preceding chapters, contain the clear traces of a cool recognition of God's special claims upon him, a recognition which had been tried by every test of serious reflection, long prayer, faithful performance of duty, penances, good works, and expert counsel.

John simply had to stand firm. There is no father nor mother living who will censure John to-day for having stood by his guns at this crisis, or who would feel anything but shame and regret if he had allowed parental considerations to deflect him from the pursuit of that beauty and holiness which his career reflects for the celestial refreshment of all succeeding lovers of purity and exalted spiritual aims.

John s letters are so self-revealing that it is important to reproduce, in spite of its length,

another written at this time. His parents had asked him to come home to Diest for a last visit before entering the novitiate. This request developed a situation which, with our changed customs, we may find it difficult to understand. Canon Froymont had been all along annoyed by the obstinate opposition of the Berchmans family to what he and many others believed to be a remarkably obvious vocation. In pity for the boy he refused permission for a visit which would only subject John to further suffering of a useless kind. It would seem, therefore, that John was bound to the canon by some form of indenture, commonly entered into in those days between the parents of a boy-apprentice and his master, which gave the canon a parent's right over John till his majority.

John's letter is addressed—"To his Honored Father, John Berchmans, Residing at the Golden Moon, Diest. Haste, haste, haste. Favored by friends." It would seem that the Berchmanses had moved from the sign of "The Great and the Little Moon" or else had their mail delivered at another house. One also notes that John addresses his father by his second name. The letter runs as follows:

"HONORED FATHER AND DEAREST MOTHER,

"I am very glad and rejoice greatly at your good health, in which may our dear Lord long spare you. I wish to let you know by this post that my master here does not judge it well that I should go to Diest, as you desire, and that for many reasons. I pray you then humbly, honored father and dearest mother, by the parental affection you have towards me, and by the love I have for you as your son, to be so good as to come here by Wednesday evening at the latest, either by the Mechlin coach from Montaigu, or by Stephen's conveyance, that so I may say, 'Welcome, and Good-bye' to you, and you to me, when you give me, your son, back to God our Lord, Who has given me to you.

"One thing, though, I should like very much from you, dear parents, for I cannot do it myself, and each hour of delay seems to me like a day; and it is that you, with my aunts, the two Béguines, and my brother, and any other good friends who are willing to do so much for me, and for my soul's salvation, should go to receive our dear Lord at our Lady of Montaigu, and that you would offer me to her ever Blessed Son and to herself with the same joy

of heart with which our Lady offered her Son Jesus Christ to God the Father. Should this act of devotion delay your journey here, I had rather you would defer it till your return. I recommend to you heartily this good friend, who for my master's sake and for me, does me the kindness (of delivering this letter). Treat him well. I pray you also to get him lodging at grandmother's, or in our own house.

"Remember me most kindly to my grandfather, my grandmothers, and above all to my special and best of benefactors, the reverend precentor, Van Groenendonck, that he may be good enough sometimes to think of me in his prayers, and to uncle Pellen and aunt Kathleen. I have still some little souvenirs which I hope you will take away with you. Pray for me, all of you, very heartily, that our dear Lord may give me perseverance to the end of my life. This recommendation I ask you to make to all my friends. I send it to them as an aidieu."

At the end of the letter there is a postscript by Canon Froymont: "Mynheer President John Berkemans, do not fail to come the very first opportunity this week."

His aunts, "the two Béguines," were so designated from a Flemish religious Sisterhood of that name of which they were members. They seem to have been the only persons among John's numerous relations who all along tendered him sympathy and support in his high ambition, if we except the precentor mentioned so favorably towards the end of the letter, of whom nothing further is known.

While we cannot withhold all compassion from the hard-headed Flemish burgher and his thrifty wife, we can see that there was nothing for them to do after a letter like this but to capitulate. It is a good thing to have a saint in the family. He may make it uncomfortable at times; but he keeps it from drifting very far out of its divinely charted course. One cannot fail to observe that John's piety was not a pose, borrowed from a youthful fascination with saints' biographies, an artificial adoption of poorly mastered formulas. The careful reader of these letters will find much to convince him that the seventeen-year-old boy was not employing the language of clever and facile reminiscence, but the straight, emphatic speech of experience and genuine feeling. He could be as hard-headed as his

father. If the father was pleased to make it a contest of robustious common sense, he realized that he had met his match in his oldest son. It is pleasant to be able to end this chapter with the announcement that Charles Berchmans saw his son off to the Jesuit novitiate with his parental blessing. There were still some reservations to his approval, which were to disappear completely in the course of the following year.

CHAPTER X

A PICTURE OF JOHN

WITH John's passion for perfection, arising from an intense love of Christ experienced from early childhood, we should conclude that his vocation to the religious life was a foreordained arrangement clear to himself and everyone else. Yet, we have seen how his family—a pious family, too—refused for a long time to recognize its claims. It is almost as surprising to find John declaring that his thoughts were first directed to the religious life while reading the letters of Saint Jerome. It might be supposed that he would naturally gravitate without the aid of books towards a form of life which offered continual opportunities of advancing in spiritual perfection and the love of God. It would seem that it is possible for a strong vocation to remain, as it were, held in solution till pre-

cipitated by some chance hour of companionship with a good book.

One more interesting comment of John's about his vocation is on record. It is less astonishing than the other and explains why he selected the Society of Jesus in preference to older religious Orders with which he was more familiar. Father Cepari, the Jesuit rector of the Roman College, the confessor and biographer of Saint Mary Magdalene of Pazzi and Saint Aloysius, and destined before his death to be the confessor and biographer of Saint John Berchmans, had published his Life of Saint Aloysius while John was still a schoolboy. The book fell into John's hands during his last year at college and was a revelation to him. He recognized a kindred spirit, master of the secrets of sanctity, and sensitively responsive to the same Divine ardors which warmed his own heart. This close spiritual brotherhood between the son of the Italian nobleman and the son of the Flemish burgher could be satisfied with nothing less than an avowed brotherhood in the same religious Order. The youthful type of sanctity represented by Saint Aloysius naturally had a special charm for John; he knew he could not be

far wrong if the were to employ the same means of acquiring perfection and growing in the love of God.

John entered the Belgian Novitiate on Saturday, September 24, 1616. He was in his eighteenth year. Father Cepari's portrait of him a few years later ought to help us to visualize him at this time.

"John was of fair height, of a ruddy complexion, and excellent constitution, by no means thin. His face was really angelic, rosy and white, his forehead broad, his eyebrows so thick that they seemed to be black, and the same might be said of his eyelashes. His eyes were bright and lively, but bashful and full of goodness and sweetness, and ever going downcast. His nose was regular and slightly aquiline, his lips small and very red. There was always a modest smile playing about them. His hair was light, and his upper lip and cheeks were (that is, five years later) just beginning to be slightly covered with an auburn brown."

It is not unlikely that this picture, taken when John was entering into manhood, may err in some details of John's appearance as a novice. We know, for instance, that his health

was not robust during his last year at college and during his novitiate. But, making due allowance for the angularities and uncertainties of the growing years, we have the picture of an attractive and pleasant sort of boy in the young Flemish novice.

A religious novitiate, whether regarded as a house or as a process, is something of a mystery to the world at large. Like most human mysteries it resolves itself on close view into very simple and logical lines. The object of the religious life is to afford opportunities of cultivating spiritual perfection: the object of the novitiate is to instruct and train candidates for that life to detect and seize the values of its carefully devised opportunities. The vows of chastity and poverty supply for the most part only negative opportunities by removing encumbrances which distract from the singleness and directness of devotion to God's work. It is the vow of obedience which creates the principal constructive opportunities in the business of perfection. The main energies of novitiate-training are directed towards teaching the candidate the important lesson that the measure of his love of God is precisely the measure of his willingness to sur-

render his own inclinations and will for the love of God.

During the novitiate, in the very nature of things, the field for this self-renunciation which is the supreme test of the sincerity and sanity of love, is necessarily confined to a daily series of comparatively trifling duties, in themselves not onerous, but furnishing occasions for alacrity in laying aside one's will for the love of God. Human nature in its self-indulgent moods is there being constantly annoyed by an intrusive and clamorous alarm-clock peremptorily banishing rest. The spirit of the response to this importunately recurring alarm will vary with the intensity and seriousness of the candidate's preoccupation with the love of Christ. The trials of a religious novitiate are all of a rather petty kind; but it is safe to assert that no normal youth of any mettle will find it possible to submit to them for two years unless he recognizes in them splendid opportunities for trying out the constancy and ardor of his attachment to Christ.

This description of the general atmosphere of a novitiate is almost necessary for an intelligent view of John at this stage of his brief

career. It will explain, too, his eagerness to enter the novitiate, and help us to understand the nature and method of the heroic sanctity which he achieved in so short a time.

CHAPTER XI

THE NOVITIATE

JOHN was accompanied to the door of the Belgian Novitiate in Mechlin by Henry de Vriese, one of his school-fellows who was to follow him later into the Society. He was ushered into an apartment where he found himself in the company of another newly arrived novice, named Theodore vander Meer, who had come from a distance. John shook hands with the stranger, got his name, and with boyish exuberance plucked up the drooping spirits of Theodore, who was eight months younger than himself and far from home. "Come, brother," said John, "let us rejoice that we are in the house of the Lord. We must not be found unworthy of so great a favor. May both of us always live in this holy Society of Jesus, where God's service calls us; and may we meet in heaven after long and hard work, never to be separated again." As they

turned to look into the garden, John saw a lay-brother turning up the soil with a spade. He flung his gray cloak over a chair and exclaimed, as he seized the astonished Theodore and bore him off to an exit, "There! we can begin at once; there is no better opening for religious life than humility and charity." Members of the community who happened to be in the vicinity, were then treated to the sight of two young gentlemen in traveling dress enthusiastically assisting a puzzled-looking brother to spade his garden.

Later on in the day, when he had met his old friend Father de Greef, and had been received as one of themselves by those assigned to take care of him for the first few days of his residence, the realization of his happiness was complete and he could not restrain tears of joy. We are told that he wept the entire evening from sheer delight.

It has been said very unjustly of Berchmans that he was of a heavy and phlegmatic temperament. Certainly his manner on the present occasion affords no grounds for such a conjecture. Nor is it possible to maintain that the nervous and high-strung energy of his first day in the novitiate was due to the excitement

of new surroundings. His eager mood falls in naturally with all that we have seen of him so far, his pre-eminence in his studies, his habit of flinging himself without reserve upon whatever undertaking duty or the inspirations of grace and good sense recommended, his unfailing popularity with boys even when traversing all their dearest traditions. It is impossible to form a definite and consistent image of the young Saint now or later, unless we suppose him to be the owner of ardent and buoyant spirits, sensitively alive to impressions and always on edge for every challenge to his courage and endurance in a finely conceived service of God.

With the instinct of genius he recognized in the rapid succession of small duties, which the order and rules of the novitiate imposed upon the will, a rare field for the exercise of the love of God and a test of his generosity. He was not deceived by the apparently trifling nature of these duties. Though each was as light as a feather, he knew the cumulative effect would be a strain upon the heroic resistance of wills naturally prone to change and relaxation. "Perfection does not consist," he said, "in doing great things, but in doing well

what obedience orders or advises." Many a lad who enters a novitiate braced for the performance of difficult feats, experiences at first a contemptuous and humorous surprise at the petty nature of the demands upon his constancy and generosity, and then passes by slow gradation from his mood of amused disdain to defeat in a despairing struggle with the little gad-flies forever urging natural inertia onward and upward to the heights.

John's high conception of the importance of small duties, and his singleness and purity of purpose in the faithful performance of them, are perhaps best attested by his eagerness to receive criticism and—this is a most significant addition—his genuine gratitude for any criticism received. John and his fellow-novices each had an official critic, appointed by the novice-master from among themselves; and at stated times the novices so paired would meet and mention the small lapses from the rules which each had noted in the other. The opportunities for criticism could not be improved, since they were thrown together day after day in a common life of great intimacy in which there was little privacy. John begged and obtained permission to have four

critics instead of one. It was not a priggish challenge, though we should not blame the four critics over much if they accepted it as such. We may suppose that it sharpened rather than dulled their scrutiny. Finally one of the critics caught John napping. Absorption in a difficult task made Berchmans forget about some minor duty. The critic called his attention to it; and, although we are told the fault was most excusable, was overwhelmed by John's gratitude. He was promised so many prayers by John that he set himself with renewed vigilance to put himself in the way of earning more prayers. It is recorded that he never succeeded.

A still more extraordinary story is told by the novice-master. "After repeated requests," he tells us, "on the part of this excellent young man to have his faults publicly made known, as is the custom in the noviceship, I could not any longer refuse him this satisfaction; so I told all the novices, then more than one hundred in number, to jot down and give me in writing any defects they had noticed in Berchman's conduct. I got these notes, and on opening them found that not one had been able to observe the smallest defect in him. This

seemed to be a thing unheard of among so large a body of young men whose exceedingly delicate consciences—to say nothing of a very praiseworthy rivalry and a vivacity suiting their years—were well fitted to spot the very least faults in any of their companions, especially one who was the mark of more than ordinary proofs of respect and esteem. The result of this meeting caused much greater confusion to our humble novice than if he had been convicted of the gravest faults. We could not help pitying the sorrow which crushed him, and we tried to console him as though he had fallen into some terrible disgrace. All present were delighted and edified by his innocence and humility."

Father Bauters, who tells us this, was not, as we can see, without some shrewdness and sense of humor. But we may be permitted to suspect that he failed to enter completely into John's point of view. As a matter of fact John did disgrace himself. He had committed a tactical error in forcing a public avowal of his virtue which he had never anticipated. The path of sanctity is beset with occasions for the exercise of nice judgment. It is cer-

tain John failed on the present occasion. How was he to know that a desire for humiliation was to issue in a distressing triumph? A saint, it is clear, must walk with circumspection.

CHAPTER XII

FORCE OF CHARACTER

THERE is a current opinion that the piety of English-speaking Catholics is self-conscious and secretive, and superior for this reason to the more demonstrative piety of continental countries. A quiet and unostentatious piety, it is argued, must be deeper and more sincere. It would be interesting to investigate the subject historically with a view of determining just how much the Protestant tradition of belittling the externals of divine worship has been responsible towards the formation of this opinion among the Catholics of Protestant countries. In pre-Reformation England Catholic piety could be demonstrative enough without exciting comment or suspicion. Doubtless, the fervent Latin temperament supplies some grounds for a skeptical regard of visible manifestations of intense devotion. But we must guard our-

selves from the mistake of taking for granted that piety must be superficial and insincere simply because it shows conspicuously.

The piety of the saints has always been ostentatious; not because they particularly wanted it to be ostentatious, but because they could not help it. All their attention and energies were preoccupied with God: what men thought of them never seemed to cost them much concern. This will explain why a boy like Berchmans could be revered by superiors and equals as an angel, and treated with unconscious consideration, without having his young head turned and without losing any of that freshness and spontaneity which constitute the charm of his sanctity. There is no evidence anywhere that he was ever tempted to complacency or to the intrusions of self-consciousness or self-respect. His eye was single, and it was on God. There is a virile strong-mindedness about his piety. He had no time nor inclination for nonsense. The main business of his life was the service of God, which left no leisure for poring idly over human consequences, whether of praise or dispraise. Of the two he would prefer dispraise, if it did not involve offense to God.

He was of sober Flemish stock, modified in his instance into an incandescent eagerness by a lively temperament and his wonderful love of Christ, but beyond the reach of any suspicion of theatricality or pose.

Among the hundred novices, Dutch and Flemish for the most part, with a sprinkling of Irish and English, John was one of the youngest. Most, if not all, of them were utter strangers to Berchmans when he entered the novitiate. His extreme youth and attractive appearance and passionate thirst for perfection would, of course, win the esteem of young men whose ideals he so completely realized. But we should be mistaken if we supposed that this esteem was merely a sentimental admiration which seniority indulgently bestows upon young and charming innocence. The recorded incidents of John's novitiate days are unusually numerous, and they all point to a forcefulness of character very remarkable in a boy of seventeen or eighteen. We are again confronted with the old difficulty of having to understand how John in some way, not easily comprehended at a distance of three centuries, succeeded in uniting sets of qualities ordinarily divergent.

He had three nicknames, "the angel," which seems to have been the commonest, "St. Hilarius," and "St. Laetus," the latter two suggested by his uniform and unfailing cheerfulness. "The mere sight of him," one of the novices testified, "could dispel any fit of blues." Newcomers were wont to pick him out and to ask who that happy person was. "I lived two years with him in the novitiate," declared another. "Well, I am ready to take an oath that I never noticed in him the smallest impulse of impatience or anger." The evidence is too emphatic to allow us to suspect that John's cheerfulness was the heavy, artificial kind assumed out of a sense of duty, which the dullest eye can penetrate and scorn. We are obliged to concede a natural sprightliness of manner which gave touches of grace and beauty to the resolute purpose of the young novice.

For he could be stern on occasion. John was in a small group of novices who were recalling the difficulties they had experienced in following their vocation. One of the older men in the group had broken off a marriage engagement at the cost of great violence to his affections in order to embrace the religious life. John thought he entered too much into

unnecessary details, and did not hesitate to tell him so. "Have done, brother, with these particulars," he said, "they are quite right I am willing to believe, but surely they are little in harmony with the sort of life we have chosen."

John could carry out bold measures without stirring resentment or ridicule. On one occasion some novices near him fell into an angry dispute. John employed all his resources to pour oil on the agitated waters. When he saw that the squall was beyond the influence of ordinary controls, he plumped down on his knees in their midst. The argument was swallowed up in the general amazement. "If I am in fault," said John, who now had the floor all to himself, "forgive me; but, I beg you, do not let there be a dispute among brothers." This spirited and rather sensational intervention came off successfully and peace was reëstablished.

John's qualities of leadership were recognized when he was made "manuductor." The position of manuductor calls for vigilance, sound judgment, and tact. The manuductor is the agent and representative of the master of novices; he transmits the order of the day

and is responsible for carrying it out. He leads in the common prayers, makes the arrangements with heads of various departments, and gives the signals for the beginning and ending of the short periods into which the novices' day is divided. He has to be wide-awake with all his wits about him from morning till night. If any reader of these pages should happen to entertain an idea that John's sanctity was a dreamy and bemused sentiment, he will have to relinquish his notion on learning that John's manuductorship remained a tradition of excellence in the novitiate of Mechlin for long years after.

The forcefulness and vigor of the boy's character made permanent impressions upon the life around him; some of the modifications which he introduced found their way beyond the Mechlin Novitiate, and still survive. In many Jesuit houses it is customary for the community to visit the Blessed Sacrament before going to bed, a practice which dates back to the time of Berchmans, who inaugurated it by the force of his example and by gentle and persistent agitation. Anyone who knows the inexorable conservatism of religious communities, in the introduction of novelties in devo-

tion, will rate this as a noteworthy achievement for a youth of eighteen.

It is interesting to learn that in John's time devotion to Saint Joseph was not nearly so prominent in the life of the Church as it has since become. With the sure instinct of his all-engrossing love of Christ, John recognized the supreme position of Mary and Joseph among the saints in virtue of their intimate association with the Incarnation. His love of Christ and our Lady could not exclude the third member of the Holy Family from its ardor. "What God has joined together," he would say, "let no man put asunder." With the practical sense of an organizer and promoter, John carried out his ideas by selecting three of the novices who, he thought, would most readily fall in with his plans and be able to gather a following to put them into effect. "Once when we were walking together," one of these confederates writes, "he began to talk to me about the prerogatives of the foster-father of Jesus. At his request I agreed to spread among the rest as much as possible the devotion to so great a saint. We bound ourselves in particular to speak of his dignity whenever we had a chance, and never, if pos-

sible, to say the Litany of our Lady without adding at its close the collect of Saint Joseph." It is a curious instance of the anticipations of genius that at present that prayer is said after the litanies in Jesuit communities all over the world.

CHAPTER XIII

FILIAL AFFECTION

THE young have a terror of death which diminishes as old age advances. To depart from the shores of time too soon to have left some imprint of one's presence on the sands has always seemed the pathetic feature of early deaths. And yet it is the simple truth that only those who die young stand any chance of having their real life and personality rescued from the ever-encroaching waters of oblivion. Once we survive our contemporaries, though we be Shakespeare or Saint Francis Xavier, the world will never have a chance to know us as the friends of our youth and prime knew us. The child whose quaint sayings and pretty ways remain a family tradition after its death until its brothers and sisters have all become grandfathers and grandmothers, has lived longer in a certain true sense than the men we call great, for of them

we are likely to know nothing except some public achievements and some mature habits and characteristics, which are oftener a disguise than a revelation. There are seldom surviving witnesses of the young and ardent years in which habits and characteristics are forged, to give posterity intimate glimpses of the personal forces which have issued in greatness and fame.

It is doubtful, for this reason, whether any of the great names of the past stand for so much living and breathing personality to discerning readers as the names of Saint Aloysius, Saint Stanislaus, and Saint John Berchmans. We can watch them in the making. Their peculiar form of excellence challenged and afforded unusual opportunities to the most scrutinizing observation, which their early death released from the obligations of secrecy and the reticences of prudence and propriety. In particular is this true of Berchmans. He was recognized everywhere as a living counterpart of Stanislaus and Aloysius. One of his fellow-novices persistently refused to read the Life of Saint Aloysius, because, he said, he had before his eyes day after day the actual image of Saint Aloysius in John Berchmans.

Of course, this general recognition could not help sharpening observation and setting memory to the task of making more retentive records. The result is that we have a wealth of detail about John's few years in the Society of Jesus. The reader is referred for a larger measure of these details than this short study can afford to the longer Life by Francis Goldie, S.J. It is a remarkable fact that with all this abundant material for a portrait, the figure of Berchmans seems to be less sharply etched upon the popular mind than the figures of Stanislaus and Aloysius. How much this is due to the elements of romance and contrast in the lives of the latter two saints, and how much to the want of skill on the part of John's biographers, it is hard to say.

It is certain that the biographer, who does not represent John Berchmans as a youth of singular magnetism and charm, has not made the most of his materials. If there is one fact more outstanding than all the others in the testimony of his contemporaries, it is the fact that he was liked immensely by those who lived with him. His popularity was no mere success of edification. He was not a sculptured saint upon a pedestal, a remote object of awe

and pious boasting to appreciative communities. His preoccupation with the love of Christ only served to establish closer contact and more human relationship with his associates. Any picture of him which fails to make lovableness a prominent and characteristic feature cannot be said to conform to the actual reality.

It is to be feared that the kindly human element in John has been somewhat obscured in the eyes of modern readers by his aloof attitude towards his family. Thus, we read that on one occasion he did not wish to pay a visit to his home when he might have done so. He had been sent with some other novices on a pilgrimage to Montaigu. The road to the shrine would take him close to Diest, and his superior gave him permission to visit his relations in his native city. John advanced reasons for not accepting the invitation. The superior said, "Very well; do as you please about it." But John's companions were less amenable to reason when they discovered that he proposed not to stop in Diest. One of the three novice-friends mentioned in the last chapter was of the party, and has left the following account of the episode.

"We omitted nothing to persuade him, first of all, that it was evidently the intention of the Superior that he should go to see his father, although he had not quite given a positive order to that effect. Again, that such a visit might be for the greater glory of God. He, on his side, gave very good reasons against it; but after a few moments' discussion, which had been sustained with the best intentions on both sides, seeing that we held firm, 'Listen,' said he, 'examine the thing seriously, and tell me what seems best to you in the Lord; I engage to abide by your decision.' We made a short prayer to our Lady, and then decided that he ought to visit his father. He gave in without another word."

On its face this incident puts John in a hard and repellent light. But we must not wrench it from the context, so to speak; it is sure to be misleading and unjust to John if considered apart from the circumstances. In the first place, it is to be noted that John's reasons are not stated. His companions thought they were very good reasons. Their failure to tell us what those reasons were, was probably due to a delicate regard for the family of the Berchmanses.

There is no desire or need to blacken others in order to increase the luster of young Berchmans. And it is quite certain that no one can hope to win the saint's approval by praising him at the expense of his friends, least of all, at the expense of his mother. But the mind is here confronted with an apparent contradiction, namely, John's gentle consideration for everyone, on the one hand; and, on the other, his coldness towards those whom he was under special obligations to treat kindly and affectionately. John was neither cold nor insensible to obligations. One can only conclude that some of the evidence has been suppressed out of deference to his relations.

It is certain that the elder Berchmans wrote to his son during the first year of his novitiate, urging him to come home and not to spoil his brilliant prospects by burying himself in the religious life. It is perhaps an unworthy suspicion which points to Mrs. Berchmans as the innocent cause of John's trouble in being allowed to follow his vocation freely. She had been an invalid for many years. Her parents and other members of her family were living next door. The little information we possess about their relations with John's family leads

us to suppose that they were rather worldly and unspiritual in their outlook. Although they were wealthy, it is recorded that they never lifted a finger to help Charles Berchmans in his difficulties. It seems not altogether unlikely that they were able to influence the weak invalid and to impose upon her their own worldly estimate of John's folly and cruelty in placing himself beyond the possibility of helping his parents to maintain their rightful position among the respectable burghers of Diest.

If this surmise be anywhere nearly correct, it would be perfectly natural for John to be reluctant to visit his home. He would only disturb and excite his sick mother. How could he enter into argument with her? Nor could he be expected to feel eager to see his maternal relatives next door, if they had alienated his mother from him at just that particularly intimate point where mothers and sons are generally most at one. When John's mother died he induced his father to make a retreat, with the result that Charles Berchmans wished to become a Jesuit also. But his age was considered an obstacle to such a step, and he became a diocesan priest. One

of John's brothers later entered the Society of Jesus. It is hardly credible that the Society would have been attractive in either instance if John had behaved unnaturally towards his people.

When the news came that his mother was dying, John wrote to her the following letter:

"My Dearest Mother in the Lord,

"The peace of Christ be with you and with all. I rejoice and am delighted at seeing the great blessing which the unending goodness of God—praise be to Him!—has up to this time bestowed on all our household, in, first, calling me, unworthy as I am, to the fellowship of His only Son Jesus here upon earth, and now also by inviting you, my dearest mother, to His bridals in heaven. Now, for seven or eight years, you have proved the miseries of human nature, and have tasted, with Christ Jesus, of the chalice of His bitter passion. See Him now standing there at your bedside with outstretched hands ready to embrace you. 'Come, My bride, My friend. Up to this you have been nailed with Me to the cross. Henceforth you shall rejoice for all eternity.' See the holy Mother of God, Mary! See Saint Elizabeth!

See your holy angel, and cry out with me, 'O Lord Jesus! Behold here Your poor handmaiden, standing with Your all-holy Mother, Mary, ready for whatever You wish! O Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! O Mary, behold my children, whom I with so many tears have nurtured in the fear of God; I offer them up to you to be your sons, your children. Be thou, O Mary, their Mother.' I, too, pray thee with all my heart to adopt me as thy son, and my brothers and my sister.

"Well, then, ever dear mother, fight bravely. Think of the crown that is being made ready for you. I hope we shall not lose you, but that in heaven you will cherish us with greater love and affection. I pray you with all my heart not to refuse me a mother's blessing. Here we are all praying for you, that God may give you what is best for you. I hope you, in return, will not forget me. Fight bravely, dearest mother.

"Your loving and obedient son,

"JOANNES BERCHMANS."

If we suppose that this is the letter of a son to a mother, somewhat alienated from him through the unwarranted and foolish meddling

of her relations, it will surely recommend itself to everyone as a pathetic and wise little letter. He yearns for her sympathy and approval. Back in his mind there is a smouldering sense of the injustice his relations have done him; but with a delicate refinement of reticence he never so much as glances at it. Still, with all the solemnity that his young eloquence can summon, he strives to counteract their unspiritual influence over the being he loves most on earth by helping her to rise above the contracted horizons of time and worldly advantage.

Looking back through the clarifying medium of three centuries, it ought not to be hard for any Catholic reader to envy the grace and good fortune of Elizabeth vanden Hove Berchmans. Not every mother has at hand the filial love of a saint to brush aside from her last hours the films and cobwebs which obscure her vision and her final progress to the arms of Christ and the company of the blessed.

CHAPTER XIV

GENEROSITY AND COURAGE

IF I were asked to name the most characteristic quality of John Berchmans, I should not hesitate to say that it was a brave courage. He was never called upon to make heroic renunciations of a spectacular kind, nor to meet adventure on the roads of the world, nor to face clenched antagonisms, like so many of the martyrs and confessors of Christ. Even Aloysius Gonzaga and the very young Stanislaus Kostka, his youthful counterparts, had a larger share in these striking heroisms than he. Yet his gesture of smiling valor is not less obvious than theirs.

"May I die," he wrote in his private notebook, "rather than violate deliberately the smallest order or rule. I would rather lose my health altogether than preserve it by not keeping a rule." All through his novitiate he had to be restrained by his superior from a

reckless disregard of his health in the performance of private penances. He usually wore a hair-shirt. He had to be supplied with cloths to staunch the blood of self-inflicted scourgings. In winter he rarely approached a fireplace; we are told that the chapped condition of his hands and ears during this season excited remark. He shirked eating whenever he could elude observation until the Father Provincial ordered him to eat his meals. There was nothing soft about him. Yet, this hardy youth confessed again and again that his greatest penance was an unvarying fidelity to the routine of community life. The imagination and the nerves, especially of the young, can easily be enlisted by nature in the manufacture of excuses for occasional relaxations. It takes courage to sweep these excuses off the boards. "Rather die," said Berchmans, "than for health's sake break a single rule."

This is the characteristic gesture of the big and noble man. A great leader of our time, who stirred a nation into new life by his spiritual ideals and his contempt of worldly values, has left us this true saying: "No one can finely live who hoards life too jealously: one must be generous in service, and withal joy-

ous, accounting even supreme sacrifices slight."

This fine disdain for health and life is not vain bravado either in the patriot or the saint. It is born in the conviction that human life is not altogether or primarily a shabby little affair of diet, physical exercise, worldly respectability and mediocre performance. John believed that life was given him in order that he might show his love for the Giver of it: that his soul was his to show his love for the Redeemer of it. He was not absorbed in canny calculations of the precise compromise which would conceivably be satisfactory to God, the world, and self. Love, whether of God or of the world or of self, has no use for nicely graduated measures.

The religious novitiate is the introduction to a kind of life which offers, every hour of the day and night, reminders and opportunities to anyone who is concerned to realize his best self in a generous response to the great love of Christ for him. Far from interfering with John's close union with God, the elaborate and mechanical scaffolding of rules, and constantly changing duties, and orders and directions of superiors, were only so many convenient devices for eliciting the generosity

of his love for Christ, and bringing him closer to Him Whom he loved.

He was not satisfied with the number of existing rules. He made others for private observance. Thus, every hour he bound himself to call a halt in the progress of the day's work and to say, "Ave crux spes unica!" (O cross, my only hope!) Then he would say a "Hail Mary" and the following prayer: "O good Jesus, Thou wast scourged for my sake, what have I done for Thee in return for such great suffering?" After casting a glance over the hour just passed to see if he had done everything for the love of Christ, and had kept in mind the particular virtue he had chosen for special attention, he would say: "Pardon me, O Lord, and help me to keep the coming hour in a better manner." Then he would brace himself for a more perfect handling of the coming hour. If he were outside the house and under the observation of strangers, the hourly survey was done secretly. But, if he were in the common room of the novices, even though he were engaged with a fellow-novice when the clock sounded the hour, he would beg to be excused while he knelt for the space of a *Miserere* to make his hourly

review. He could do this without the least affectation or human respect.

His private practices became known through his notebooks. He was an indefatigable diarist of the spiritual life. The concerns of the soul were too important to be trusted to the possible treacheries of the memory. Among his notes, which are still preserved, there is an admirable summary of Rodriguez's famous treatise on "Spiritual Perfection." This great work had been in circulation for some years, and is now a common text-book of which every novice has a copy. But in John's day the multiplication of books was not so inexpensive as to-day. There was one copy in Mechlin, and it was read during dinner and supper. Since John could not have a copy for himself, he seized the first free moments after each meal to summarize what he had heard, and in this way succeeded in obtaining a good working edition of the classic treatise.

We are amazed at the perfection of manner of holy persons. Like the perfection of great artists, it seems to be the unstudied and effortless expression of natural genius. If they kept notes, which we were permitted to read, we

should invariably discover that the excellence, which looks so natural and easy, has been forged painfully through many patient months and years. Sanctity, the highest and noblest and most beautiful of all the arts of life, has, like the other arts, its own secret mechanics. We catch glimpses of this in John's notes. He had his eye on every moment of the day, and each moment was provided for in accordance with his idea of a perfect novice. When he went to bed at night he assigned places around his bed to his guardian angel and patron saints. At its head he placed his crucifix. While he undressed he thought of Christ being prepared for the cross. His bed reminded him of his last resting-place. When he lay down he crossed his arms on his breast—a posture he could maintain till morning—and occupied his mind with thoughts of his morning meditation until he fell asleep.

The first thing he did on waking was to kiss his crucifix and to recur to the subject of his morning prayer, and, if it were a Communion day—for daily Communion was not then the common practice it is now—to prepare his heart for the coming of his Divine Lover. These days were high festivals to John, so that

his companions came to notice his unusual animation on the eve of a Communion day. During the hour's morning meditation, made in the common room, he could lose himself completely in the thought of God and in the feelings inspired by the subject of his prayer. The other novices used to vie with one another to be next to him at that time in the hope that their hearts might catch fire from the visible ardors of John. His fervor came, of course, from his vivid conception of Christ's goodness and beauty. But it can hardly be denied that it was the effect, as much as it was the cause, of his close communion with God painstakingly maintained through the routine of the day. It is worth while noting that he attached more value to prayers said in common with his brethren than to private prayers.

As we have seen, even before his entrance into the novitiate he had schooled himself to detachment in the matter of food. After saying grace and seating himself, before unfolding his napkin he would recollect himself and purify his intention for the space of an "Our Father;" then he would divide his food, giving the better share to Christ Whom he pictured

sitting at his side. When his superiors interfered with this practice, he kept on eating what was before him until the course was removed.

He had two rules for the community recreations: "(1) Pure intention, (2) resolve to speak on pious subjects in the presence of God." How faithfully these rules were carried out may be gathered from the testimony of his novice-master: "He had one joy, to think of God, to speak of God; besides God, he had no joy whatever. Would you please him, did you wish him to like you? You must talk about God. Did you wish to displease him? Throw in jokes on worldly matters. God alone was in his heart, on his lips and pen. He knew nothing else."

It is the peculiar quality, now as heretofore, of his intense piety that it never seemed to disturb the nice balance which the diversified interests of practical life demand. Belgium being a bilingual nation, French had been made the ordinary medium of intercourse in the Mechlin Novitiate, so that the Flemish novices could not help learning it. Although young Berchmans knew no French when he

entered the house, in a few months he could not only write it with correctness but could preach in it with such fluency as to excite admiring comment. His intellectual life was kept on the alert, rather than held down, by his piety. He had bound himself to pray every morning at Mass for grace to become a fit instrument for the work of the Society of Jesus. Whatever learning or accomplishments the Society set him to acquire he strove to master with all his power.

This faint outline of John Berchmans's general bearing and manner in the novitiate would be incomplete without two characteristic touches which the recorded incidents of that period afford. As is the custom in Jesuit novitiates, the novices on Sundays and holidays taught catechism at various rural centers where the people lacked abundant means of religious instruction. John entered enthusiastically into this activity. His congregation said they preferred to listen to him than to preachers of long experience. "When he had finished his instruction," writes the lay-brother who was wont to accompany him, "he heard only a part of the Mass which was being said,

telling me once that he would willingly have heard it all, but he was afraid of scandalizing the simple country-people. Because those novices who had preceded him in the giving of the instructions at this center used to leave for home before the Mass was ended. If he were to depart from their custom, the people might get it into their heads that his predecessors had not heard Mass elsewhere and take scandal as a result of their rash judgment."

Thus we see John's practical prudence was wide-awake. Not less conspicuous was another characteristic of all sane and solid sanctity, namely, an entire forgetfulness of self in contributing to the common weal. As manuductor he had the unpleasant duty of notifying the recipients of the small penances imposed upon them by the novice-master for some breach of the meticulous laws of the strict and exacting polity of the novitiate. John used to beg, frequently with success, that he might perform the penances in their stead. Of course the offenders never discovered the vicarious part he played in their punishments. It was generally understood that he was always at the service of anyone. Although every moment of his day was mapped out with a

thrift, that was perhaps partly Flemish, he believed that no moment could be better improved than by employing it in the interests of whoever had immediate need of his help.

CHAPTER XV

VOWS

IT must be evident to the most casual reader that John's strong love of Christ found a free and congenial field for its secure exercise in the Society of Jesus. If we are disposed to regard with despair, or alien bewilderment, as something beyond the range of human endurance, the high tension, without break or relaxation, of his spiritual life, let us rearrange our perspective until the seeming exaggerations of John reduce themselves to a logical proportion.

"You must not spare the little ass," John used to say of his body and its inclinations; "it is good to shake him up from time to time." With most of us a régime of constant goading would issue in frayed nerves, broken health, and mental disturbances. Whereas John's temper, health, and cheerful equilibrium im-

proved with every increase of pace to which he put his beast of burden. This is by no means a mystery. If Christ were to disclose Himself in all the ineffable sweetness and power of His love and beauty to the most sluggish of us, spending the day with us, coming in and going out with us, and standing by in all our tasks, it is inconceivable that we should find dullness in the most driving of routines or irritation in importunate calls upon our energy. Every draught drawn by circumstance upon our comfort and complacence would be honored with alacrity simply because it was a tribute of our love for Him and pleased Him. That was His way when He lived among men. He wants us to go the same way, not because He wants to see us hurt and bruised, but because it is the only way by which we can realize our best self and enjoy that happiness which He wants to see us enjoying.

If Christ were to walk with us through the day in this fashion, we should be having the time of our life. And people, who would not know, would be pitying us and wondering how we could stand it. Just as we sometimes

catch ourselves thinking about John. Let us not waste any pity upon John Berchmans. He was having a perfectly satisfying time. He slept well, was able to eat well, wanted to go to the remote missions of China some day, and entered with zest into all the preparatory processes to which the Society of Jesus subjected him for his own perfection and for future labors and adventures in the great business of kindling the fire of Christ's love in the hearts of the world.

One of the best proofs of our supernatural destiny is the fact that human nature cannot realize its highest possibilities except through the love of Christ and the supernatural means He has placed at our disposal. The saints, and no one besides the saints, have succeeded in realizing the best and highest in human nature. While exclusively intent upon the love of God, running its errands, so to speak, and plying its tasks, John Berchmans was unconsciously shaping into a perfect type of man. What eye can fail to draw delight from the picture of him which John's novice-master has drawn for us? "All of us who have had the happiness to live with him and to know

him, have been of but one opinion about his holiness. He led among us a truly angelic life, by the great innocence of his heart, the modesty of his behavior, his wondrous courtesy and gentlemanly manners, his peaceful way of acting, his perseverance in all good he undertook, his perfect and prompt obedience, his rare prudence on every subject, the fervor he displayed in all he did, without ever forgetting for a single moment the presence of God, like the angelic spirits who walk ever in His sight."

Christ and the atmosphere of Divine Love in which he moved were actual and intimate realities to John, making obedience and service a keen delight. He could not wait for the completion of the two years of probation before pledging himself entirely and forever to the religious life in the Society of Jesus. After his first year of novitiate he was allowed by his superiors to take the vows of the Society privately. Although these vows of devotion, as they are called, imposed an obligation on his conscience, they did not admit him into formal and complete membership into the Society, and he longed for the day when

the Society of Jesus would publicly accept his vows and take him to her heart. The following letter reveals his feelings as the happy day grew near; it was written to his father, who was now a priest and a canon of St. Sulpice in his native town of Diest:

"MOST HONORED FATHER IN CHRIST,

"Pax Christi,

"Worldly parents, who are filled with false ambition, are greatly pleased when their children get married to the princes and great ones of this world, and especially when the marriages bring them a larger fortune than their own. Yet this joy is often empty, and even foolish. Would that such parents were not forced now and again to bewail and abhor for all eternity the lot of their children, which once had so delighted them. To you, dearest father, this letter of mine offers a far other joy, pure and without dregs. Rejoice, rejoice, here is a cup of gladness, not empty but real. What is it? Your son, on the 25th of September, so he hopes, will die. Will die? Yes; but he will die to the world—by the death of the just.

"O sweet death! O death, no death, but sweetest life! May my soul die the death of the just! Where, and by what torture? On the cross of Jesus, with Jesus, pierced with the three nails of poverty, chastity, and perpetual obedience, he will die with Jesus. Oh, how sweet it is to die in the Society of Jesus, in the arms of Jesus!

"Rejoice, my good father; in this death your son will live and will live happily. What can be happier, what more delightful, than this life, passed with such a Spouse. Oh, that my soul were clad with a garment of virtues fit for the presence of its Beloved! Oh, that it could spread the rich banquet of its vows for the most Holy Trinity, the Blessed Virgin, and all the angels with appropriate love and dignity.

"I will try hard on my part to do this during the days on which I am just going to enter. But, as it is not within my unaided power, again and again I beg of you to ask the help and protection of the Blessed Virgin—by three Masses of the Holy Ghost at Montaigu. I hope, too, that grandfather and grandmother, my uncles and aunts, and other friends, will not let me miss their prayers.

For the rest, with all my heart I commend myself to your Reverence's Holy Sacrifices.

"Your Reverence's Most Humble, Obedient Son in Christ,

"JOHN BERCHMANS.

"Mechlin. The Novitiate of the Society of Jesus.

"1618, September 2."

The ecstacy of this letter will be unintelligible to cold hearts. But at least they can and will wish sadly that their sense of Christ's love for them were fiery enough to break into such burning speech. John's superiors thought his eagerness and fervor needed restraints rather than extraordinary provocation; and so they did not allow him to make the retreat, which is prescribed as an immediate preparation for the taking of the vows. John's disappointment may be gathered from his pious plans and anticipations for this retreat, to which he refers in the last paragraph of his letter.

On the morning of the 25th, Father Bauters, the novice-master, said the ordinary low Mass in the novitiate chapel. The altar was decorated, as is usual, when a novice is to take

his vows. At the communion John approached and knelt down on the altar-step; and, after the blessing, when the priest turned towards him with the Sacred Host, John pronounced the vows of perpetual poverty, chastity, and obedience, and consecrated himself wholly and entirely to the life and work of the Society of Jesus, declaring that he did this in the presence of the whole heavenly Court, and begging divine assistance for fidelity to his pledge. He then received the Blessed Sacrament.

It is all very simple; but to all who have gone through it, it is an experience of soul-shaking beauty. Missionaries in lonely wildernesses, proscribed priests hunted like wild animals on land and the high seas by governments hostile to the Faith, lay-brothers in life-long tasks of humble manual toil, ministers of heroic service on battlefield and in plague-stricken cities, in hospitals and in prisons, and the hundreds and thousands who have never been called upon to nerve themselves for some last and glorious exploit, but have had to keep their spirits fresh and, amid humdrum employments, ward off with prayer and reflection the deadening encroachments of routine,—all

these have looked back years afterwards to that morning Mass in a community-chapel when they said their vows and felt a brotherhood of rapture with Loyola, and Xavier, and Gonzaga, and Kostka, and Berchmans, and Alphonsus Rodriguez, and Campion, and Jogues, and Marquette, and many another; and they have found refreshment and new impulse in the memory. If this has been the common experience of Jesuits less favored of heaven than John, we can form a fairly accurate concept of the tumult of happiness in the heart of John during his thanksgiving after the Holy Communion with which he sealed his vows.

CHAPTER XVI

JOHN LEAVES THE NOVITIATE

THE two years of the Jesuit novitiate are followed by two years of what is called juniorate. The juniorate is spent mainly in study under conditions of strictness and supervision resembling those of the novitiate. It is intended to serve as a graduating interval between a course of intensive spirituality and long years of study, and to help the newly made religious to learn how to advance in the spiritual life by his own vigilance and devices under any conditions. The religious life is not designed at any of its stages to minister to the comfort and complacence of human nature. If the periods of a Jesuit's life, which follow upon the novitiate, may be called easier and less exacting, it is only in the sense that the elaborate scaffolding of constructive spirituality in which the novice works has been removed. The spiritual

structure is expected to stand and to grow from strength to strength after the supports of the novitiate have been withdrawn, and it is again exposed to the insidious action of human distractions and employments.

At the present day the Jesuit juniorate is devoted mainly to the study of the ancient classics and the vernacular literature, after which the young Jesuit proceeds to a three years' course of philosophy and science. In John's time the two years of literary study were omitted. A partial explanation for this omission can be found in the curriculum of the colleges of that period. Little or no attention was paid in the schools to the vernacular literatures of that time: indeed, it is only during the last hundred years that living languages and literatures have been introduced as serious and systematic studies in the classroom. The consequence was that in the older day a diligent boy on leaving college had acquired a fairly complete mastery of Latin and Greek, at least sufficient to enable him to pursue further perfection in these tongues on his own initiative. As for modern languages and literatures, he was supposed with his equipment of

classical training to pick them up as occasion and opportunity offered.

By this arrangement John was sent directly from the novitiate to the triennium in philosophy. The first two years of his philosophical studies thus became his juniorate. He was sent to the Belgian house of studies in Antwerp during the week following his vow-day. During the interval he slipped the following communication to Father Sucquet, the Rector of the Novitiate and for a time his novice-master:

"It is a pleasure to me, Father, to be allowed to have recourse to your Reverence as to my heavenly Father, for you hold His place. So, confidently, and in spite of my unworthiness, I come to you to beg one only favor with my whole mind and heart, as a son would do from his father—that as my father, you, who for nearly three whole years have had me under your charge, would be so good as to let me know my faults. For these are what close heaven against me, and put a hindrance to grace. So, Father, as you love my soul, stamped as it is with the image of God, pray tell me them; as a father let me know them.

"I have good reason to ask this one favor as a last gift from your Reverence; for, if I go away without this knowledge, who, I pray, can give it to me? Who is there that knows my faults better than you? Again, I have never acknowledged all the pains you have taken about me, all the favors you have done me. But what can I do in return? How can I repay you? I confess, I confess, Father, how exceedingly I am indebted to your Reverence. I am yours, I am yours entirely; I never can be other than entirely devoted to you. Pray make use of me as often as you wish and for whatever you wish. You know my feelings and attachment towards you, and I know yours toward me. And so, as without fail from the first day of my noviceship, I have to the best of my power ever been mindful of your Reverence in my poor prayers; so, as long as I live, whithersoever I go, I will ever cherish your memory affectionately and inviolably.

"Your Reverence's Servant in Christ,

"JOHN BERCHMANS."

On arriving at Antwerp John seized the earliest opportunity of seeing Father De Clercq, the Rector, and of laying bare his

inner life to one who was to be in virtue of his official position his superior and spiritual guide. Father De Clercq, of course, was impressed by this interview with his new subject; and, curious to discover how much of this young perfection was merely borrowed and notional, and how much real and genuine, he undertook to snub the young philosopher and, after failing to discover any real faults in him, to rebuke him for imaginary ones. John reveled so much in the luxury of such a severe superior that the Rector quit in discouragement. Father De Clercq was the first to make a formal declaration of the heroic sanctity of John when his cause was opened before the ecclesiastical judges in Antwerp five years later.

John had been in Antwerp for less than a month when he received orders to go to Rome for his course of philosophy. This unusual favor gave him the greatest pleasure, which he frankly manifested when receiving the congratulations of his brother-students. The thought of seeing the Vicar of Christ and the General of the Society, and of mingling with men distinguished for their learning and holiness, on ground consecrated and made historic

by the prayers and labors of great saints, filled him with glad anticipations. Getting close to the heart of the visible Church seemed to satisfy in some measure his yearning for proximity to the Heart of Christ. When he expressed himself as puzzled why the choice of superiors should fall upon him, while so many of his associates were holier and more gifted than himself, we have to give him credit for sincerity. John's honest directness is too apparent to allow us to believe that he knew the language of vain compliment and mincing self-depreciation.

And now a strange thing happened, which confirms our vague suspicions about the rather unamiable qualities of his relations. John was given a week to prepare for his trip and to say his farewells to his family. He wrote to his father and went on to Mechlin to meet him. What was his surprise on reaching the latter town to discover that his father was dead and buried. Ten days had gone by since his death, and none of his relations had taken the trouble to send him the news. This shocking indifference to John's natural feelings staggered him all the more, coming as it did in the exhilarating moment of his prospective jour-

ney to Rome. We could hardly blame him if he sadly closed the book of his relations, fastened the clasp firmly upon it, and laid it away forever on the topmost shelf of forgotten things. It is interesting, therefore, to read the letter which he wrote to his relations in the disconcerting circumstances:

"I. H. S.

"A friendly greeting be this letter to you all —grandfather, grandmother, aunts, uncles, and to all my friends. The reason of my writing is this. I received an order on Thursday last—to wit, the 18th of October—from my Superiors, that I should get ready immediately to start for Rome on the coming Monday. And when I came to Mechlin to recommend myself to my father's prayers, and those of all of you, I learned that my father died long ago. I was very much astonished and ill-pleased that you had not let me know this. However, I consoled myself with the thought that I had every day of my life fulfilled the office of a good son towards his father; with this difference, that I had prayed for him every day as if he were alive, while in reality he was dead.

"I pray all of you, my dear friends, with all

my heart, to take care of my two brothers, Bartholomew and Charles, that they may be brought up in the fear of God, and in good manners, remembering that in so doing you will be very pleasing to Almighty God. I hope that Mary, my sister, and Adrian, my brother, will be known for their good behavior, and that Adrian, for the years that I shall be in Rome, will give his brothers a good example, and sometimes even good advice. I should wish our guardians to consult the precentors of Diest and Mechlin to see where these two children might best be placed.

"I should have come to see and bid good-bye to you; but, as the time is so short, I am obliged to recommend myself to you by this letter, begging earnestly of you to recommend me and my journey to our Lady of Montaigu, that I may complete it without accident and with good health. You will learn shortly how it all fared. Will you let all my friends read the first part of the letter I will send?

"My dear aunts, Mary and Catherine Berchmans, and Margaret Berchmans, Catherine van Hove, and Anne van Olmen, I beg you by your friendship towards your nephew, John Berchmans, that each of you would get

two Masses said at Montaigu, to help me on my way, that I may accomplish this journey to Rome with the good of my soul. And have a little care of my sister and brothers, and principally of our Charles, whom I should never like to see taken from his studies, for I expect great things from him. I hope that our dear Lord will soon provide for them, and I will do my best for this; and in all the holy places in Rome I trust I shall think of you.

"Yours devotedly,

"JOANNES BERCHMANS."

A brave and sensible letter indeed to have been written by one, who was still a boy, in an hour of bitter chagrin. It is a satisfaction to know that his ambition for Charles was realized. Charles, the fourth child in the family, died a Jesuit after a long and honorable and useful career in the Society. Adrian, the second child, became an Augustinian monk a few months after John's death, taking for his name in religion the name of his saintly brother. Bartholomew, the youngest of the five children, became a soldier; and Mary, who came between Adrian and Charles, was married to a lawyer in Mechlin.

John had one more letter to write before setting out. He sent an earnest entreaty to the good Canon Froymont to do what he could for the proper education of his three brothers, ending with the following postscript: "Say everything kind from me to my Adrian, Bartholomew, and Charles, whom perhaps I am never to see more. And the keepsake I leave them is this: 'Increase in holiness and the fear of the Lord and in learning.' Good-bye to all."

One cannot help noting in these two letters the importance attached by a saint to learning and good manners.

CHAPTER XVII

JOURNEY TO ROME

JOHN'S request for prayers for a safe journey was not an idle formula. The trip was to be made on foot, and, on account of the Thirty Years' War raging in the German countries, by a long detour through France. The road lay through Ghent, Paris and Lyons, and thence over mountain-passes fraught with the perils of winter. John's companion was another young Flemish scholastic, Bartholomew Penneman by name, like John, sent by his superiors to pursue his studies in Rome.

They left Antwerp on the 24th of October and arrived in Rome on the last day of the year after having traveled nearly a thousand miles, seldom stopping over at any of the Jesuit houses on the way for more than a day. Human curiosity cannot help feeling balked that John, industrious note-taker that he was,

has left no diary of the incidents of the roadside and the inns during this long pedestrian tour. As the two travelers reached Rome in good health, it is likely they experienced the pleasures of the open road. They were both young; the bracing air of autumn made walking a delight; landscapes of golden stubble-fields and coloring forests bordered the road up to the gates of strange cities; then there was the winter silence and mystery of mountain heights, and, at the end of the road, Italy, the warm and beautiful garden of dreams; and, last of all, the imperial city of Christendom, the fateful center of conflict between Light and Darkness, whose domes and palaces and relics of past follies and past sanctities still cast their shadows across seas and oceans and fill the imagination of those who live and die in the remotest corners of the earth.

It would be a mistake to suppose that John was oblivious of the charms of such an adventure. He possessed health and high spirits, and the study of the classics had made him sensitive to the elusive disclosures of the beauty and delight of the world. But it is not the way of a saint to delay upon sensations of pleasure: to rest in them is to spoil them. If we have

learned anything up to this about John, we must know that every thrill of the winding road and the unfamiliar cities placed him under new obligations to the beauty and goodness of God, obligations which he strove to discharge by new fidelities and denials. The beauty of the autumn woods has often caused the hearts of poets to ache with exquisite pain: only the saints know it is not the woods, but the splendor of God gleaming through them. The only written records of that trip are contained in some letters sent to Rome about that time from various Jesuit houses which were visited on the way, in which there is casual mention of John's extraordinary qualities, and congratulations to the community which was to receive him as a member.

At Milan their brother-Jesuits in that city took the two young Belgians to the ducal palace and other show-places of renown. But the grandeur of historic Italy, unusual as it was to one fresh from the sober homeliness of Flemish cities, failed to startle John. He must have been the despair of ciceroni. He confessed to a friend in Rome that he could not remember looking at the monuments and treasures of the city's greatness. Perhaps he

was too tired; perhaps he was bored by the unspiritual triumphs of human vanity and pride. One experience stood out from all others: the two travelers arrived in Loretto on Christmas Eve and were able to attend midnight Mass in the basilica and to receive Holy Communion in the Holy House. During the two days spent at the Jesuit house in Loretto, John, to his great delight, came upon traces of the presence of his beloved Aloysius Gonzaga.

Five days later they saw the dome of St. Peter's in the distance, and that evening, the last of the year 1618, they entered the House of the Gesu, the Roman home of the General of the Jesuits. Father Mutius Vitelleschi, who was the sixth General of the Society of Jesus, received them graciously and invited them to remain over New Year's day to celebrate the feast of the Circumcision, the patron-feast of the church.

This brief sojourn with the choicest spirits of the Society, in the very house in which Saint Ignatius and Saint Francis Borgia had dwelt and prayed and directed the world-wide ventures of the Society, nerved John to redoubled efforts in pursuit of that perfection to which the grace of God and the rules and

examples of the Society of Jesus were so urgently inviting him. It was in this frame of mind that he began his life in the Roman College.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ROMAN COLLEGE

THE Roman College, now called the Gregorian University, after its founder, Gregory XIII, had been started by Saint Ignatius in 1551 as "A Free School of Grammar, Humanities, and Christian Doctrine" with four students and fourteen professors. Two years later courses were opened in philosophy and theology. Forty years later, in 1591, when Saint Aloysius was in residence, the students numbered 2100. The thoroughness of its courses and the brilliant reputation of its teachers, men like Cardinal Bellarmine, Cardinal Toledo, Suarez, Maldonado, and Vasquez, attracted students from all over the world. Though the Gregorian, as it is called, at present occupies different quarters from those of the old Roman College, it retains its traditions sufficiently to help us

reconstruct the conditions in which John lived during his three years in Rome.

The Roman College was a large building, housing a Jesuit community which consisted of officials, teaching staff, and scholastics, numbering in John's time about two hundred, following courses in science, philosophy and theology. Non-Jesuit students to the number of several thousands came every day to the Roman College to attend the lectures. Owing, no doubt, to the difficulty of supplying textbooks and books of reference abundantly in an age when book-making was an expensive process, there was a great deal of dictation during the lectures; and after each lecture the students remained in the lecture room for half an hour to review the ground gone over by the lecturer. For this purpose they were divided into groups, and in each group one was appointed *Repetitor* to go over the lecture for the rest. This was a position which John filled for a time. There was one formal disputation every week before all the students in a course, in which Jesuit and non-Jesuit students took part: besides this there was another reserved only for the Jesuit scholastics.

The scholastics who, like John, had just come from the novitiate, lived for the first two years of their course in philosophy, in a separate and distinct part of the college and under stricter rules than the rest of the community. They were still "juniors," with a spiritual director of their own, with extra exercises and instructions and manual employments, and were not allowed to mingle freely with the older scholastics and the fathers.

The following letter, written to Canon Froymont after John entered the College, gives his impressions:

"VERY REVEREND SIR,—

"Pax Christi.

"I should fear to incur the reproach of ingratitude if I let slip so favorable an opportunity without paying my respects to your Excellency, to whom I owe so much. For it is to you, reverend sir, I confess I am indebted for any success I have had in my studies, for whatever has flowed into my mind of the milk of piety and the fear of the Lord. Yes, and even my being in the Society of Jesus; for though so unworthy and wicked—I own it, and I willingly own it—I am, for all that, a com-

panion of Jesus, and that is enough for me; all this I owe to your most religious training.

"I enjoy very good health at Rome, whither, last year, by my Superior's orders, I came from Mechlin. I have finished my first year's course of philosophy in the Roman College of our Society, in which there are more than two hundred Fathers and scholastics, for the most part continually engaged in study. How wonderful it is! Nearly all are of different nationalities. There are Spaniards, Poles, Germans, Portuguese, Dalmatians, Sicilians, Neapolitans, Belgians, Frenchmen, and men of other countries. And yet they are united with such a bond of love and charity, that they might be all sons of one mother. And among such as these am I. Good God! . . . For the rest I only commend myself to the holy sacrifices of your Excellence, and I will ever be mindful of you. Given at Rome, in the Roman College of the Society of Jesus, November 23.

"Your Excellency's Servant in Christ,

"JOHN BERCHMANS."

"P. S. Affectionate regards to M. d'Ittré, Giles, and his people, my brothers and sisters, and all at Diest. I should wish your Excel-

lence to take care that my brothers and sister go to confession every week, and receive Holy Communion every month. About anything else I have no anxieties. That my relations had to beg their bread from door to door would not be a trial or a shame to me. That they should offend God mortally, I could not endure."

Father Cepari, the biographer of Saint Aloysius and the future biographer of John himself, was Rector of the college while John lived in it. His professor of philosophy was Father Francis Piccolomini, a member of a patrician family of European prominence, and destined to be a successor of Father Vitelleschi as General of the Society of Jesus. Father Horace Grassi was his teacher of higher mathematics, and Father Tarquin Galluzzi his lecturer on ethics, both of them men of eminence.

Among his associates were two future Generals of the Society, Alexander Gottofredi and Paul Oliva, also members of famous Italian families, and Cornelius à Lapide, the great commentator on Holy Scripture. In this college at this time learning and sanctity seemed

to be in the very air. Saints and scholars were almost natural phenomena hardly separable into distinct classes. The spirit which animated them in their studies finds expression in an entry in John's diary where he notes down reasons for patience and industry in the pursuit of learning:

"I am come into religion to work and not to be idle.. Heretics are so ardent in acquiring knowledge which they will afterwards use against Jesus Christ, and will you be content with only ordinary application when you have to defend our Saviour? Men in the world go in for study with such zeal, because they hope for the empty reward of honor, and will you be less jealous of God's glory than they are of their own? I must apply myself to my studies, not allowing the smallest moment to be lost, and never failing to note down anything that is worth noting in the scholastic discussions."

It is not to be wondered at, in the light of this resolution, that, although John had missed the first two months of his course, which began in November, he soon caught up with the rest of his class without any sacrifice of the time and attention which he was wont to de-

vote to his spiritual life. Before his triennium was completed he was to win distinction among young men selected and brought together in the Roman College for their unusual talents and attainments.

CHAPTER XIX

HARD STUDY

ONE of the most popular fallacies, which the contrary evidence of the facts seems to be powerless to destroy, is that saints and poets are necessarily unpractical and out of touch with common every-day life. Coventry Patmore wrote a very excellent manual on the way to manage an estate; and their biographies serve to show that great poets have not been altogether helpless and vague in the puzzling cross-currents of life. As for the saints, Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa are by no means exceptional instances of great holiness allied with wisdom and careful attention to details in the affairs of the world.

Pseudo-poets and pseudo-saints, who scorn common life as an offense to the nostrils, are responsible for the shallow criticism of the average man, who thus finds a convenient support for mediocrity of vision and performance.

Neither saints nor poets are the chance products of a favoring environment. Anyone who says that he might have been a poet or a saint, if circumstances had been arranged differently for him, is, we fear, merely making a confession of failure or ineptitude.

Saints, even more than poets, have always set a high value on their daily instalments of life in whatever guise of form and circumstantial color it came to them. No one can deny the wrapt intensity of John Berchmans's spiritual life from a very early period in his childhood; and yet there is discoverable not the slightest sign that he ever once disliked or shirked a commonplace demand upon his attention as a troublesome intrusion into his devotions. On the contrary, he seemed to have discovered the secret of transmuting the distractions of the day into spiritual treasure: therefore, he fell upon them with vigor. He was no fastidious dilettante daintily picking his way down the common road.

Perhaps the most striking thing in his life is the enthusiasm with which John now threw himself into his studies in the Roman College. These studies were not especially ecclesiastical nor conducive to piety: moreover, they

were pursued in a large school where public tests of proficiency stirred emulation and brought into play all the natural motives in the struggle to excel. One should expect a saint would dip gingerly into such a life, as one who knew the vanity of human learning and the danger of winning human applause. Let us reflect upon the strange fact that John found in an almost fierce application to study an admirable expression of his love of Christ and his passion for spiritual perfection.

Father Piccolomini was John's favorite professor. As a student himself, and afterwards as a professor and a General of the Society of Jesus, it will be readily conceded that he enjoyed unusual opportunities for observing remarkable instances of close attention to books. He was not a man easily betrayed into over-statement. This is his considered opinion of John: "Berchmans, besides excellent talents, which were peculiarly capable of taking in a number of different subjects at once, possessed an ardor and application for work, such as no one, in my opinion, ever surpassed, and few are able to equal."

What makes this opinion of Father Piccolomini all the more extraordinary is the fact

that the Society of Jesus sets all sorts of restrictions upon the studious inclinations of its younger members. Thus, John might not burn the midnight oil in chasing down some point in philosophy or mathematics; he had to be in bed at nine. During his juniorate, in particular, large portions of the day were taken away from study and given over to prayers and spiritual instruction and manual tasks. The students of the Roman College, moreover, were not allowed to make their studies the subjects of conversations during the recreations in the common room of the College after dinner and supper. John might desire to practise his Italian on the native students at odd moments; but there was a rule which enjoined the speaking of Latin in the casual intercourse often necessary during working hours.

These restrictions are not intended to discourage scholarship, but rather to keep it from losing contact with life and reality and becoming barren or eccentric. Moreover, they serve to create in the young student a high estimate of the value of time. When we know that our time is limited we are more likely to improve it. The wisdom of these restrictions was justified in Berchmans. He not only ob-

served them with scrupulous fidelity, but even added others of his own making. Thus he obtained permission from his superiors to spend in spiritual retreat every month one of the free days which serious students find so acceptable for catching up in their matter or for pursuing private investigation. Yet John seemed to have ample time for everything. Father Cepari, a literary man of some distinction, declared that John spoke Italian with the ease and elegance of a cultivated Roman; and, at the end of his course, John was chosen to give a public defense of the whole field of philosophy, an honor conferred only upon an exceptionally brilliant student and most creditably carried off by John before a large and impressive assembly of Roman doctors and students.

His note-books help to explain his success. We find in them his ideal of a perfect Jesuit student under the heading, "A Good Scholastic of the Society of Jesus." Here are certain regulations which, in John's mind, should govern a perfect scholastic in his relations towards God, towards his studies, and towards others. As John's contemporaries all agreed that he embodied this ideal in his life at the Roman

College we may take the picture as of himself.

He never stopped to ask about the utility of any study he was put to. It was his ambition to be sent ultimately to the missions in China, where it was very probable he would have little or no need for much of the erudition which his courses imposed upon him. But it was his principle to concentrate all his mental energy upon any subject that came up, regardless of future contingencies. He never used any books except those recommended by professors and superiors. Even here he denied himself legitimate latitude. Thus, he begged to be excused from reading the "Confessions of Saint Augustine," which Father Cepari had lent him, declaring that the distress of going through the early chapters was too much for him. He attached much importance to taking notes which were to be reviewed regularly and recopied after a process of reduction and selection. He had a preference for Father Piccolomini among his professors, but he accepted them all alike in the spirit in which he accepted the subjects of his course.

Every moment of the time designated for study and lectures was carefully hoarded. He did most of his studying standing at a high

desk. He was the victim of headaches, which sometimes obliged him to put his books aside. On such occasions he took his rest in saying his beads or reading a spiritual book.

We gather from the observation of Father Piccolomini, already quoted, that John possessed what might be called an all-around mind of the broad Baconian kind, ready to be interested in knowledge as such, and not impelled by nature to particularize in any special field of knowledge. This character of his intellect may have helped him to be so inclusive and indifferent as to his professors and the nature of his studies. But, on the other hand, it is a cast of mind which is peculiarly eager and curious. And one cannot avoid the conviction that the stern discipline to which John subjected himself in his studies was more heroic than may easily be appreciated.

The only study which engaged his attention, outside of the regular curriculum, was the study of languages; and this for apostolic purposes. At the end of his triennium in the Roman College, besides Latin, which, of course, he spoke fluently, he knew Flemish, French, and Italian. For a young man of twenty-two this was not bad. He was matur-

ing plans for learning English and German, and for extending his knowledge of Greek, when death came to interrupt all academic pursuits.

Judging from the results we can acquiesce in the declaration found among the Saint's notes: "I find that by generously giving the whole morning on Communion days, and on feast days a whole hour, and every month one whole day to spiritual exercises, I do not at all interfere with my studies."

CHAPTER XX

LITTLE PERFECTIONS

IT is not easy in a compendious biography to convey a vivid picture of the sanctity, declared by the Church to be heroic, which John Berchmans practised during his three years of study in the Roman College. "I have seen no one," says Father Piccolomini, his professor and confidant, "who in an ordinary and common life had less that was ordinary and common." It was the characteristic quality of John's sanctity that it found

"Under the common thing the hidden grace,
And conjured wonder out of emptiness
Till mean things put on Beauty like a dress."

But the splendor of this type of sanctity is a very subtle splendor, not always obvious to the hasty glance. It consists of innumerable little shades and touches, which cumulatively,

no doubt, produce an effect of marked distinction, but singly and in detail are not impressive.

Those who were living with Berchmans had no difficulty in catching, so to speak, the mass-effect of his minute perfections; and in the detailed biographies of the Saint we can capture in the wealth of material somewhat of the profound impression which he made upon his contemporaries. It is one of the serious limitations of a brief biography of Saint John Berchmans that it must be selective in its details.

"If I do not become a saint while I am young," John used to say, "I shall never become one." It is the habit-making time when man's life is in the spring. And the formation of good habits, which is another name for perfection, requires all the energy and spirits of mettlesome youth at its best. Sanctity is the greatest force in the world. It can send its currents to the outermost confines of time and space, stirring into motion the moral inertia of man, to which the dead weight of mountains is a trifle. The generation of this celestial power may, as in John's case, seem a very quiet and tame operation. Just so does

an electrical power-house, propelling crowded cars through distant places, fail, as an exhibition of mighty forces, to meet our expectations.

The source of John's energy was his love of Christ. But it may be remarked that, whereas it is comparatively easy to manifest love in the big things of life, it requires infinite patience, foresight, and the most indomitable perseverance to show it in the small things of life. Many a man can lay down his life for another with whom he cannot live for an hour without quarreling over a trifle. It has been observed of human love that, while it is on the look-out for heroic opportunities of proving itself, it wrecks itself on the little opportunities, not realizing that the heroic is embedded in the commonplace present and not in remote contingencies. It is far more desirable that my friend should practise the little courtesies of the hour in my company than that he should be ready to die for me in a crisis that will probably never arise.

The great difficulty in showing our love for Christ is that we do not recognize our opportunities till they are past and gone. We are always being surprised into betrayals of our

love by unforeseen accidents. This is the precise weakness against which John directed all his powers of resistance. It is most interesting to watch him taking every precaution against surprise amid the engrossing occupations of his studies and the distractions of the greatest show-city of the world.

Every noon and every evening, no matter where he happened to be, whether in his room or on the street, he never omitted the practice, enjoined by his rules, of subjecting the intervals to a searching scrutiny of a quarter of an hour, to see if anything had gone wrong or if something could have been done better. Besides these there were briefer and more casual reviews in between, as when on entering his room he would bless himself with holy water and kneel down for a short prayer. During the three days' retreat which is made twice by scholastics during the working year, besides the annual retreat of eight days made during the vacation, John spent most of the time in drawing up an order of life for the ensuing half-year. This order was based on his experience of the preceding six months. He saw what could be improved, noted where something else might be added in the way of

devotions, penances, acts of courtesy and charity, or application to his books. He tried to figure out all possible contingencies and to make up his mind what would be the best thing to do or to say in each case. And his spiritual directors tell us that, once he had fixed on his plan, nothing could divert him from following it to the letter. The business of modifying or altering it would not be considered until the half-year was up.

"Once," testifies Father Piccolomini, "when he was narrating to me what he used to do, beginning with the morning of each day, and how many new practices he had kept on adding, I was forced to tell him he certainly would not hold out long if he did not stick to the principal points merely, and cease taking account of the smaller details; for it was exacting too much from a head already over-fatigued by studies. What I then told him was shortly verified."

The ominous note in the last sentence is something which will be discussed later on. Whether it was justified or not it was the last thing in the world to act as a deterrent on John. Saints are, literally and figuratively, the only dare-devils. They are not concerned

in the least about husbanding life or health. Sickness or health, living or dying, is all one to them in the pursuit of their high profession. They scorn to play safe. This cavalier attitude may lead to indiscretions among the young, the foolish, and the unguided; but it is absolutely necessary in conditions where unfounded and exaggerated fears and nervous apprehensions seem to be the natural motions of human nature whenever it is called upon to exert or deny itself. In the spiritual life discretion may be the better part of valor; but it will bear watching lest it be another name for cowardice. Many of us gather all our resources of courage for a supreme effort and are astonished to discover that we have succeeded in being merely sensible and normal.

"May I rather lose my health completely than for its sake break a single rule," he wrote in his note-book. His prayer to Loyola was that he might die without having once violated a rule of the Society. On the first three days of each month he made meditations on the rules. It must not be supposed from the emphasis laid on John's observance of the rules of the Society of Jesus that he was living among Jesuits who took their rules lightly.

They were living under the very eyes of the General who frequently addressed them on the importance of fidelity to the rules. Among teachers and students were future Generals of the Order, elected to that high office for their known strictness of observance. But the rules are framed to cover every moment of a Jesuit's life and encourage him to a perfection to which no limits are set, except those of Divine grace and natural aptitudes. Beyond the essential rules of poverty, chastity, and obedience, which every religious must observe scrupulously, there is a host of minor regulations descending to the smallest minutiæ of conduct. These give its own special complexion to every religious order, imparting to it a pronounced *esprit de corps,* and, as it were, blazing a safe trail of its own up the difficult heights of perfection. This network of rules, extending into the most secret privacies and covering every moment of life, must be maintained without eccentricity of manner, or loss of magnanimity and nicely balanced judgment, or breaches of charity.

One can see that an unfaltering attention to such rules in their smallest details requires not only great grace, but also most extraordi-

nary prudence, vigilance, and tact. It was these qualities which distinguished John at a time when the memories of Ignatius, Xavier, Aloysius, and Stanislaus were still almost the personal reminiscences of living men and in a city where their memorials gave actuality and force to the system of holiness which had made them saints.

CHAPTER XXI

PIOUS PRACTICES

JOHN BERCHMANS had the saints' usual love of self-affliction. He dreaded being the easy-going follower of a crucified Redeemer. He must have pestered his superiors with his importunity for permissions to practise private penances: they certainly allowed him a latitude which rather opens our eyes. He never ate breakfast except on the weekly vacation day when he had to walk to the scholastics' villa outside the city. He fasted twice a week, wore a hair-shirt on great feasts, and scourged himself three times a week. He always sat upright without using the back of his chair, and never availed himself of a support when he was kneeling.

"How do you manage to keep so recollected?" asked a scholastic who lived in the same room with him.

"I try to guard my heart," replied John, "by guarding my eyes."

We have seen that this was an old practice of John's. It suffered no lapse in Rome. There were scholastics who had lived for three years with him in the Roman College, who had never seen his eyes. In a city of gorgeous pageants he would not cross the street to witness the most brilliant and historic cavalcade. They sometimes passed him by on the streets unseen. He told someone that he felt no particular difficulty in raising his eyes. We are told that his habit of keeping his eyes lowered was not awkward or irritating. Whenever he was addressed he directed a straight level glance for an instant at the person speaking to him; and he did the same whenever he addressed another. His habit of keeping his eyes down had a pleasant effect of calm and thoughtful composure.

The purity of his soul and body shone through his countenance. One of the citizens of Rome, who for obvious reasons withheld his name, deposed through his confessor after John's death that, whenever he was assailed by violent temptations against purity, he used to go to the Roman College to look at John from

a distance, and immediately find rest and peace.

It is not within the scope of this sketch to describe at large the prayers and devotions which were at once the causes and the results of the eager flame of holy desires urging John forward. He had no difficulty in seeing the somewhat obvious and commonplace truth that life in a religious order is simply intolerable to any man of honest aspiration and spirit unless he cultivate habits of prayer. The practices formed in the novitiate at Mechlin were maintained and enlarged by John every year. Some of the more cynical of his brethren in Rome said when he first came there that his piety would cool as he approached the end of his juniorate, and the memories of the novitiate began to dim. On the contrary, it increased right along.

He was conspicuous for his devotion to our Lady. He let everyone know about it, and tried to sweep them along with his enthusiasm. He composed the following device for himself: "Thou, my Mother, Mary, ever Virgin, art the patroness of my holiness, my health, and my studies." He originated the devotion of the Rosary of the Immaculate

Conception. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not to be declared for more than two centuries after his death. In John's time it was still a subject of animated controversy. The fervor and sureness of vision in his devotion to the Blessed Virgin may be gathered from his practice of saying a Hail Mary in honor of the Immaculate Conception before every meal, and from the following declaration found among his papers:

"I, John Berchmans, most unworthy child of the Society of Jesus, protest to thee and to thy Son, Who I believe and confess, is here present in the most august Sacrament of the Eucharist, that always and forever, unless the Church judgeth otherwise, will I be the supporter and defender of thy Immaculate Conception. In faith of which I have subscribed this with my blood, and signed it with the seal of the Society of Jesus.

"A.D. 1621.

"I.H.S.

"JOHN BERCHMANS."

We have already adverted to his devotion to Saint Joseph. After the Holy Family his

favorite intercessors were his Guardian Angel, Saint John, the Beloved Disciple, Saint Ignatius, Saint Francis Xavier, Saint Aloysius, and Saint Stanislaus. These four saints of the Society had not yet been canonized. Ignatius and Xavier were to be canonized the year after John's death, and it is hard not to wish that the canonization had been a year earlier merely that we might read the record of John's delight.

John's industry as a compiler of note-books was exercised to a large extent in Rome in collecting such bits of information about the lives and labors of Jesuits as would stimulate him in his prayer and work. It was a most congenial task. Association with older men of wide information at the headquarters of the Society afforded him rich opportunities to glean interesting facts. Father Cepari tells us that some of the older Jesuits in Rome told him they had never met a better-posted man than John on the domestic history of the Society.

Besides contributing to his own pleasure and edification, these items of information served another useful purpose, which John described to a Polish scholastic in the college. "If you

want to introduce spiritual conversation both pleasantly and easily, read the history and annals of the Society. Because these, as they are all our own, give pleasure to all. I have made such a collection of facts that you could not bring up any subject that I could not illustrate by the example of someone connected with the Society."

One can understand how John was no pietistic bore, although he made it a rule never to speak in recreation on any subject other than God and His service. Father Gottofredi, a future General of the Society, who was a fellow-student of John's, tells with charming frankness that the Saint induced him to make a similar compact with himself, and how sometimes, when he did not feel equal to carrying it out, he would try to avoid John. But, if John cornered him, he took so much pleasure in the ensuing chat that he wondered at his previous reluctance.

One other use which John found for his copious notes may be mentioned. He organized among the scholastics a little circle, which met for an hour on villa-days for the discussion of spiritual topics. One of the members would give a definition of some virtue

and indicate any rule of the Society which might be concerned with it. Then someone would be appointed to explain its interior and exterior exercise. A third member would collect motives for practising the virtue; a fourth would draw up a practical programme of ways and means for its exercise; while the last man in the discussion gave illustrious examples of its practice from history and contemporary life. During the week allowed for the preparation of this material John very likely conned his note-books for striking instances. And one cannot but perceive that he had in this weekly meeting hit upon an excellent device for adding to what one of the fathers called his "bagful of stories."

CHAPTER XXII

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

ONE of the difficulties of an artist is to make his art an expression of life. It must be related to reality, or remain false and meretricious. And the same is true of the great art of sanctity. It is easy to practise heroic holiness in an ideal region of the imagination which lacks all contact with life in the rough. Many men and women, whose lives will not bear a very searching scrutiny, can formulate the most beautiful moral standards in poems and novels and social converse. The energy and intensity of their passion for moral perfection seem to exhaust themselves early on the road to performance, so that when the time comes to act no energy or intensity remains. As if an athlete were to go back a mile to take a running jump.

A very noticeable trait of John Berchmans'

life after he had taken his vows was the openness and candor of his pursuit of holiness. He made no secret of his aspirations to be a saint. Why should he? Everyone ought to be a saint. It was our principal business on earth. He never liked the demonstrative exuberance of the Italians: at least he would not adopt any of it himself, and one of his private rules was never to congratulate anyone in the academic triumphs of the college. There were sure to be occasions, he reasoned, when congratulations would be unavoidable and would have to be more or less insincere. But honest Fleming that he was, it is doubtful whether he would have admired what has been called Anglo-Saxon reticence in piety. It is not improbable that he would have deemed it a characteristic expression of Protestant pride and the beginning of worldliness.

John did not care how many people knew he was trying to be a saint. The more who knew it, the better. They might be able to help him. And he might be able to help them. He was not voluble; but he could talk well; and, if there was occasion, he never minded speaking freely about his own experiences in the search for perfection. He absolved his

confessors from the obligation of secrecy in the matter of his own confessions. Sanctity was life itself to him, and he made no effort to separate them. He took every opportunity to commit himself before all the world to a strenuous policy of personal sanctification.

A life like this, led in the open as it were, might be expected to afford occasions for vanity or chagrin. It is one of the strange and inexplicable things in the life of the marvelous boy that, as he never felt a temptation against purity, so he seldom, if ever, experienced the slightest inclination to be either self-complacent or melancholy. One might explain it by saying that his mind was so fixed on Christ and eternity that all human considerations were without significance to him. But the difficulty recurs when we see the elaborate and wise provisions which he made against temptations to impurity, pride, vanity, and low spirits. One would think he had had the personal experiences of ten lives behind him.

For most of us temptations keep the spiritual life active. Without them we should resign ourselves to a pleasant respectability in which worldliness plays a more prominent part than divine grace. Not so with the saints.

The special favors and graces which they receive from heaven, increase their sense of responsibility, and place them under greater obligations of holiness. They are like the great geniuses in poetry, painting and music. A great genius is not a man who takes less trouble with his art because he has superior aptitudes in it. His very aptitudes urge him to take greater pains than others to overcome the obstacles to perfection in his art.

Let us not miss the significance and beauty of a life like John's by saying that it was easy for him to be a saint since he had no trials. A moment's reflection is enough to convince us that it is harder to become a saint without trials than with them.

It is not altogether true to say that John had no trials. His trials came from the little things of life in which the warfare is more constant, more monotonous, and less engrossing than in the big things, a warfare so trying that most of us avoid it by an early surrender. We are satisfied with an impressionistic approximation to holiness and cultivate an amateur's supercilious indifference to little details.

This short study of John Berchmans has called attention with perhaps tiresome itera-

tion to the importance which he attached to what are carelessly called the smaller perfections. As the smaller perfections are the very essence of every finished work, they must necessarily be of prime importance in any study of a saint. Apart from its vivid biographical color, therefore, the following document among John's papers could hardly be omitted in any description of his sanctity. In it he drew up a list of the things that displeased him in others, and of the things that pleased him, as follows:

"Take care not to do what displeases you in others—even in natural actions:

"Spitting displeases me.

"Slowness and sluggishness in moving about displease me.

"Freedom in speech, even about spiritual matters, displeases me.

"Frequent contradictions displease me.

"Being too dainty displeases me.

"Freedom in conversation displeases me.

"An ironical way of talking displeases me.

"Keeping one's hands behind one's back displeases me.

"Looking back carelessly in the street displeases me.

"Moving one's head about without cause displeases me.

"Bursting out into laughter, shouting, laughing immoderately displease me.

"Talking in the refectory, in the church, in the sanctuary, at times when it is forbidden, displeases me.

"Notice what pleases you in others, and imitate them in that:

"I like in our Father General his modesty, affability, cordiality and joyful face; and his following in all things the order of the community.

"In Father Provincial, his love of literature.

"In Father Rector and the Spiritual Father, their being always the same.

"In Father Prefect of Studies, his respect for all.

"In my professor (Father Piccolomini), his affection and his delight in the progress of his scholars in their studies.

"In Father ——— (the name here and in the succeeding instances was omitted

in the early biography of Father Cepari), his patience in sickness.

"In Father ———, his silence.

"In Father ———, his modesty and bashfulness and love of solitude.

"In Father ———, his zeal for souls, which never grows weary.

"In Father ———, his love of his room and simplicity.

"In Father ———, his love of the Institute (of the Society).

"In Father ———, his amiability and affableness.

"In Father ———, his joyousness, even with all his spirituality.

"In Father ———, his being the servant of all, cheerful and hard-working.

"In Father ———, offering himself to be the companion of all.

"In Mr. ——— (one of his scholastics), his avoiding idleness.

"In Mr. ———, his readiness to take anyone's place in an emergency.

"In Mr. ———, his liveliness.

"In Mr. ———, his meekness and tractability.

"In Mr. ———, his cleanliness and kindness to guests.

"In Mr. ———, his sincerity.

"In Mr. ———, his giving to everything its own allotted time.

"In Mr. ———, his visiting the sick.

"In Mr. ———, his devotion.

"I like exterior gladness with great regularity.

"I like visiting the Blessed Sacrament before and after classes.

"I like saluting the Blessed Virgin, and visiting the venerated chapel of Saint Ignatius at the villa.

"I like not plucking even a blade of grass when at the villa.

"I like giving leave to the companion who shares your room to do what he pleases without minding you.

"I like letting myself be ruled like a baby a day old.

"I like doing heartily and for all you are worth whatever you do.

"I like the hands being held together before the breast and not hanging down."

This rather exhaustive list of a saint's likes and dislikes ought to be a document of absorb-

ing interest to all sorts of readers. One learns from it the curious fact that it is possible to detect more of the vital peculiarities of the life around us with our eyes cast down than by staring at everything.

CHAPTER XXIII

AMIABLE MANNERS

THE list of likes and dislikes in the preceding chapter will help us to understand the general consensus of the testimony about John's amiability in spite of his stern and uncompromising principles of conduct. The practice of perfection can seldom be said to arrive at extraordinary excellence unless it succeeds in making itself pleasant and attractive. This last touch of perfection carries with it the endorsement of sanity and sterling common sense, without which sanctity exposes itself to the suspicion of eccentricity and fanaticism, and repels sympathetic attention.

We might suppose that John's great gifts of nature and grace, and his superior success in living up to the rules of his Order, would tend to make him dissatisfied and impatient with the comparative limitations of his associates.

His superiors and confessors, men of marked sanctity, have acknowledged that his confidences used to make them feel by contrast with him the shame of their own imperfections. Yet, there is no word to describe John's admiration and attachment for the Society of Jesus except the word, passionate. His attitude towards his associates was that of Saint Aloysius, which, in the last letter he ever wrote, John thus refers to in terms of admiring approval:

"Once, when Father Mutius Vitelleschi was taking recreation with our beatified brother, the conversation turned on the excellence and dignity of our Society. Blessed Aloysius said that the excellence and beauty of the Society seemed to him such, that he would have been content to pass even through hell to look at it but for once."

Nowhere is it reported that John lived a life apart from his fellow-scholastics. If his life was singular in its heroic quality of holiness, he contrived somehow to subdue its splendor to the external tone of normal procedure. His relations with his brothers in religion were easy and natural. As we already know, he had no fondness for games, preferring a quiet

talk with someone. But if the scholastics were short of players in a kind of croquet which they were accustomed to play at the villa, John, we are told, was always ready to lend a hand. It will surprise us to learn that he used to make the sign of the cross before every stroke,—which would indicate that he did his best.

Like many hard workers he always seemed to have time to assist others. He willingly helped fellow-scholastics in their studies, and found for himself frequent opportunities for helping out in the kitchen and other domestic departments. In his first year of novitiate at Mechlin he had charge of the lamps. When he came to the Roman College he urged his previous experience and skill in this important field of activity, and obtained the position of "lampadarian" in the large and many-corridored college. It was an onerous duty for anyone going through a severe grind of studies; but the fact that the Blessed Aloysius had had the same task in the same house forty years before, converted it into a privilege for John. Among other leakages of his time, if the phrase may be used, was the habit his superiors had fallen into of sending him out with the scholas-

tics whenever they went abroad and needed a companion according to their rule. It is likely that John was chosen on these occasions by request.

John's humor was never boisterous. It had a quiet, chuckling quality which we can detect in some of the incidents which he collected for his "bagful of stories."

"Father Henry Sommalius," he writes, "once rushed down the stairs by Blessed Ignatius' room; the Saint came out and reproved him sharply. Ever after, when he had to pass the Saint's room, he carried his shoes in his hand."

"A Father of the Society," he notes again, "by name John Baptist Alexandri, noticing that a scholastic was melancholy, asked to have him as his companion on the way to the villa. He took the scholastic down a side road and asked him to take a run, saying: 'I need a little exercise; come, let's have a run.' They both set off at a great rate, after which the scholastic felt better."

The last story we shall extract from John's bag is not without a touch of gentle cynicism. "Someone said to Father Ledesma when he was dying, 'Father, you are still needed here

for the welfare of the Church.' Father Ledesma looked sharply at the speaker and replied, 'Peter and Paul are dead, and the Church has suffered no harm.' "

Our final picture of John is of a well-favored, fresh-faced youth, deferential, considerate and kindly; not thrusting himself forward; indeed, preferring to be in the background, but without morbid shyness and with a manly readiness to take his part at the front without fear or self-consciousness. He is not prodigal of speech, but his conversation has charm and is pitched in a low and well-modulated tone. He has no affectations or mannerisms, and yet strangers mark his distinction of carriage and manners. His countenance has a certain cherubic quality suggesting the self-possession of a soul whose affairs are in order, and which is in constant contact with eternity. He turns a cheerful face to the world; and, while his movements are not impetuous, in their considered deliberateness they hint at a sort of leashed alacrity. His young gravity and quiet demeanor seem to be banking interior fires of white intensity. Behind the lowered eye-lids his soul communes with God, and is fixed upon eternity; a quick

glance, whenever occasion calls, is sufficient to maintain easy and natural contact with the world and to help him to take his part in it with intelligence and decision.

CHAPTER XXIV

DEATH

IN a preceding chapter Father Piccolomini was quoted as being of the opinion that John's untimely death was due to his practice of continually adding new items to his list, already over-long, of prayers, private devotions, and self-imposed spiritual austerities and obligations. The opinion of one who is so distinguished, and who enjoyed such intimate association with the Saint, deserves respectful consideration. Yet, it is surprising how little the available evidence, concerning the death of the Saint, contributes to the credibility of Father Piccolomini's opinion.

An astonishing feature in John's life is the way his body seemed to have little or no trouble in offering a fair resistance to spiritual fires that should have consumed it. He tried it, we should think, beyond endurance, setting it to ply a multiplicity of tasks, which kept

increasing from month to month, whipping it to the mark if it was reluctant. His weak chest, which prevented him from taking his turn reading in the college-refectory, and his headaches, may not have been entirely unconnected with his rigorous treatment of himself. Still, his general health must have been good. Otherwise his superiors could scarcely have chosen him to give a public defence of philosophy at the end of his course. It is an ordeal which involves not only the credit of the public defender, but that of his school also, and is never assigned to anyone whose uncertain health and unsteady nerves invite disaster under a strain or in a crisis.

Since early childhood John had never been sick a day till about a week before his death. It is true, his austerities and high tension may have been gradually undermining his physical endurance; but, if that were true, there is little to indicate it in the evidence before us. The ordinary danger-signals of imminent collapse were absent. Overwork at a trying season of the year, such as might have induced a serious sickness in the case of normal health, seems to have hastened his end, rather than his rigor-

ous fidelity to the spirit and rules of his religious life.

On March 19, 1621, John passed his final examination in philosophy with such brilliant success that he was chosen by his superiors to give a public defense against all comers in the large theological hall of the college. He was given about three months to prepare, and on July 8th faced a numerous audience, and withstood attacks from distinguished scholars and professors invited from various colleges in Rome to challenge the proficiency of the young Jesuit. The work of preparing for a trial of this kind is nerve-racking and exhausting; the weather, we are told, was oppressively hot. But John came through with flying colors. He could now enjoy a well-earned leisure until such time as he would be assigned his work for the coming year.

During the succeeding weeks his freedom from any definite assignment made him a convenient recourse when a companion was to be chosen for trips across the city. It may have been supposed that exercise and fresh air would be good for him. It is certain that the frequency of these acts of obedience and charity excited remark. The hot streets of a Ro-

man summer are not invigorating. On July 31, the feast of Saint Ignatius, John would seem to have had some presentiment of death. On that day the little slips, containing the names of patron saints for the coming month, were distributed to the community. John read on his slip the words of Saint Mark, "Take ye heed. Watch and pray; for ye know not when the time is." It was Saturday, our Lady's day, and John accepted the sign as a message from her. He hastened to Father Piccolomini to tell him about it.

On the following Thursday, August 5, he went to the villa with the others, suffering from a slight summer disorder common in Rome. The following day, the Prefect of Studies, not knowing that John was unwell, sent him to represent the College among the objectors in a public philosophical discussion at the Greek College. When he arrived at the hall it was discovered that the learned professor who was to open the discussion with a formal speech, could not be present, and the unwelcome honor was forced upon John. John's extemporaneous address was so good that it was prolonged at the express desire of his audience for an hour. After presiding

over the ensuing discussion he walked back in the heat to the Roman College, and that night experienced an increase of his disorder with accompanying fever.

On the following afternoon John thought it was time, in accordance with the injunction of the rule, to inform his superior about his illness. He was ordered to bed at once in the infirmary, and on Sunday was visited by the doctor, who repeated his visit on the morrow, finding traces of pneumonia, but not to an alarming extent. The patient had not slept for three nights, and early on Tuesday morning his strength began to fail rapidly. Medical efforts were powerless thereafter. On Friday morning, August the 13th, at eight o'clock, John died with his eyes fixed upon the crucifix, with his rule-book and his beads clasped in his hands, and with the names of Jesus and Mary upon his lips.

During those five days in bed John appeared in a light almost novel to those who knew him best. With his body wasting and restless through long, sleepless hours, he seemed to be under the influence of some strong exhilaration, as of a man starting off on a pleasure-trip and bidding good-bye in high

spirits to friends assembled to see him off. His approaching departure relaxed the customary restraints, and in the intervals of prayer he was elated and expansive in manner towards all who visited him. Father Cepari's detailed account of his sickness gives one the curious impression of reading of a grand reception. Doctors and superiors would have wished to moderate the influx of visitors; but his fellow-Jesuits and even strangers, who knew him only to the extent of seeing him on the street, were so urgent in their entreaties to be allowed to see him, and John so eloquent in interceding for them, that neither superior nor doctor could find the heart to enforce exclusion.

"We are going, sir, we are going," he said in greeting to one of the attending physicians.

"Where to?"

"To heaven."

"I am sure you will not forget me when you get there."

"Oh, no; I shall pray for you."

Another form of salutation often used those days was, "Good day, brother, good day to you. We are off to heaven."

While he wore a pathetically apologetic air for the trouble he was giving everyone, he

flung away all reserve, and prayed aloud, and discussed intimate spiritual matters with those who begged private interviews with him. He expressed profound gratitude to his superiors and brothers, but especially to his "sweetest mother, the Society of Jesus." On Wednesday, early in the morning, when the Viaticum was brought to him by Father Cepari, he flung himself upon his knees and pronounced in solemn and spontaneous phrases an act of Faith. After receiving the Holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction, during which he answered all the prayers in a clear voice, he was seen by the assembled community to whisper earnestly to Father Cepari. This is what he said to him: "If your reverence thinks fit, you may tell my Fathers and brothers that the greatest consolation I feel is, that since I have been in the Society, I do not recollect having committed a deliberate venial sin, nor am I aware that I have voluntarily broken a single one of our rules, or disobeyed any regulation of my superiors. But I leave all to your judgment."

Father Cepari, we must remember, had John's express permission to make whatever use he wished of his confessions. It thus happens that we are allowed to listen to the very

words of the Saint's last confession. Father Cepari had discouraged him from making a general review of his life; he then made the following simple confession: "I accuse myself also of not having been sufficiently grateful to God for the benefits I have received, and of not having taken care to excite in myself an ardent desire to suffer for Jesus Christ."

That is all that one of unusually sound judgment, whose vigilance over the motions of his soul had been life-long and minute, could think of in the way of self-accusation at the most solemn moment of life. Death could not come to such a one too early or too soon. He could laugh in its face. Twice only, and briefly each time, he was troubled in what seem to have been periods of delirium. His favorite posture in bed was lying on his back, with his knees raised, so that his crucifix might rest where he could see it easily on the sloping counterpane, and with his rule-book and his rosary in his hands. He was conscious till the very end, and died as he had lived in peacefulness and prayer.

CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

IN view of the comparatively retired life led by John in the Roman College—an academic retirement which was broken only on the few occasions when John took his turn among the scholastics, as was the custom, in teaching catechism on some street-corner in Rome—we are not prepared for the public excitement which his death created throughout the city. The church where his body was laid out, was beseiged by great crowds and became the scene of so much frantic disorder that the body had to be removed secretly. The General of the Society of Jesus was displeased at the disturbance, and adopted rigorous measures to suppress all public recognition of John's sanctity which might seem an undue forestalling of official ecclesiastical recognition.

Nevertheless, devotion to John became a

popular private devotion in Rome and the Netherlands, and careful and minute enquiries were made into his life, and were formally drawn up and attested for future action on the part of the Holy See. For more than two hundred years the cause of John was allowed to remain in this incipient stage, until Pope Gregory XVI, acting on the favorable report of an enquiry made by the Congregation of Sacred Rites, declared that John's practice of virtue had been heroic. Then came a rigorous examination of the miracles alleged to have taken place at John's intercession and by the application of his relics. This investigation ended in reporting that at least three such miracles were supported by conclusive evidence. Accordingly, Pope Pius IX published the Brief of Beatification on the 9th of May, 1865, recommending the Blessed John Berchmans as a perfect model for the imitation of the young in these perilous modern times.

John was canonized in 1888, on January the 15th, that year the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. The coincidence takes us back to the early school-days of the Saint and to the Latin verses in which he strove so laboriously to give expression to the burning love in his young

heart for that sweet Name. Happy, happy youth, who could even in childhood pierce through the dull mists of mortal vision and see and be enthralled forever by the Beauty of Christ!

Pope Leo XIII, in the Bull of Canonization, after describing the new miracles found to be genuine and historic by the Congregation which drew up the report for John's canonization, makes, in its concluding paragraph, the following solemn appeal: "At this glad tidings, dearest children, let your hearts rejoice. Let them congratulate our Holy Mother the Church, who, by the action of the Holy Ghost, has borne and brought forth so illustrious a son to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for your sanctification and protection. May one and all show forth humility, obedience, chastity, a thorough and abiding profession and practice of your duties. Let young men especially, under our guidance and patronage, do that which tends so much to give hope to the Church and to society at large. Let them educate themselves deeply in culture and science, and thus show forth the folly of those who are ever acquiring knowledge, yet never coming to the knowledge of the Truth."

Alas, many young Catholics, whose culture and science were privileges and gifts of the Almighty, designed to bring them and others closer to Him, have been ruined by their very blessings. For, culture and science dim the spiritual vision and corrupt the heart wherever sensitiveness of conscience, and humble attention to the whisperings of Divine grace and to the tiresome calls of small duties, are allowed to become objects of neglect and contempt. It is one of the distressing features of a Catholic teacher's life, in every age, but especially our own, to have to witness the culture and the science which he strives his best to impart, turning in the case of a bright lad to the youth's own spiritual destruction and to the destruction of others. Science and culture are very useful and beautiful, indeed; but they are purely human. And it is the sad experience of all time that man himself cannot ordinarily remain even decently human by the employment of merely human agencies. He needs God, and Christ, and the Church, and the supernatural aids of grace and the Sacraments.

The human perfection of Saint John Berchmans could not be forged by human instru-

ments. Science and culture cannot save a man's soul. While they can help him to save it, they have a natural tendency to limit his horizon to the things of earth, and to make him forget his supernatural destiny. May Saint John Berchmans obtain for us the grace of finding in science and culture what he found in them so abundantly, namely, the means of advancing in faith, in purity, and in the love of Christ.

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